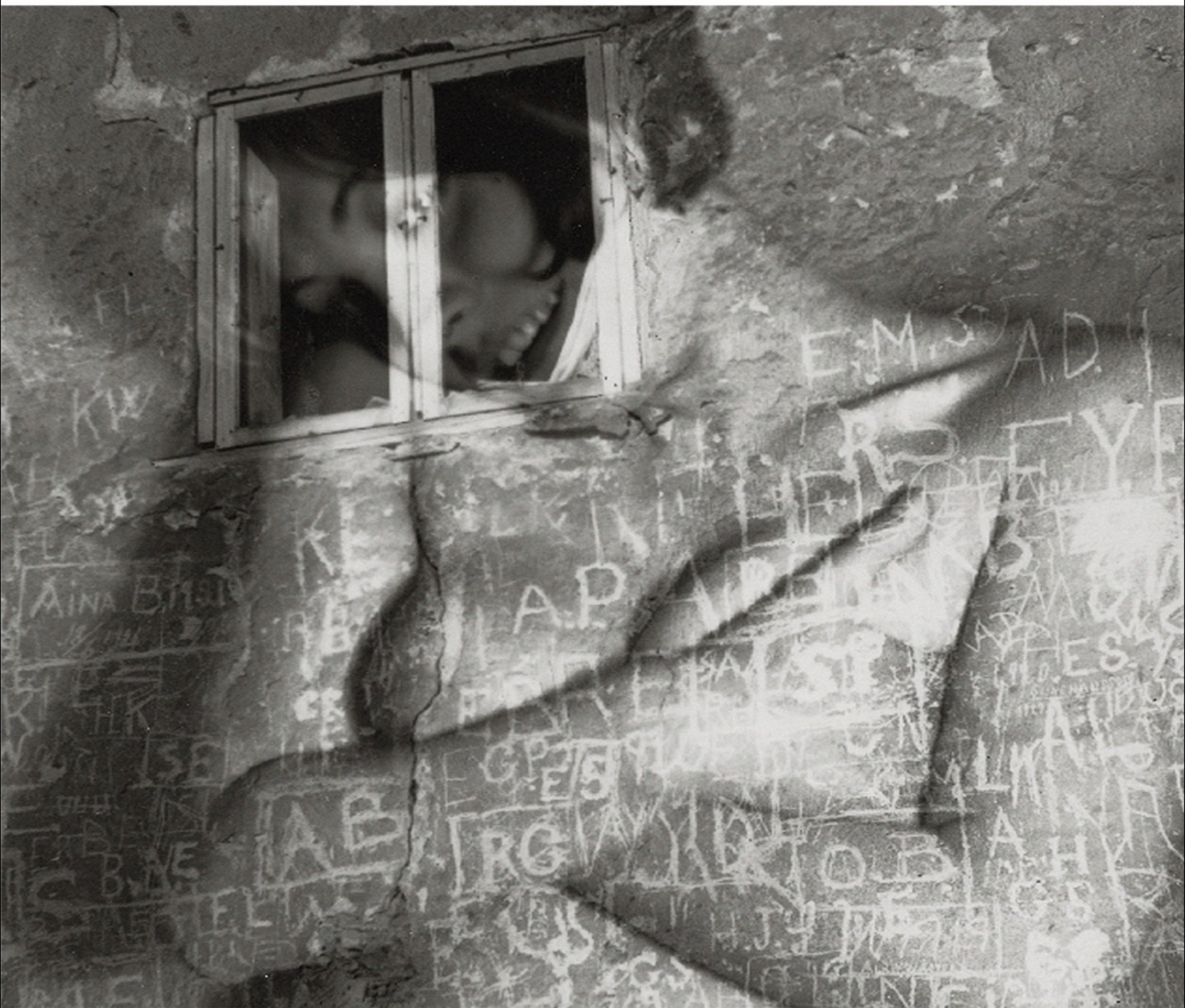




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Georges Simenon

The Man Who Watched the Trains Go By



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The Man Who Watched the Trains Go By

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. *The Man Who Watched the Trains Go By* was first published in 1938, during the period when Simenon retired his famous Maigret series in order to focus on making a name for himself as a literary writer and not just a creator of genre fiction. In a stormy meeting with his publisher a few years earlier, Simenon had declared: 'It's over, I'm quitting . . . Let's put Maigret on the shelf. I don't need handrails anymore. I think I can write a real novel now.'

The Man Who Watched the Trains Go By

GEORGES SIMENON

Translated by SIÂN REYNOLDS



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1.

In which Julius de Coster the Younger gets drunk in the Petit Saint-Georges and the impossible suddenly overflows the banks of everyday life

As far as Kees Poppinga was personally concerned, it must be admitted that at eight o'clock that evening, there was still time, since his destiny was not yet fixed. But time for what? And could he do anything other than what he was about to do, convinced as he was that his actions had no more importance that evening than during the thousands and thousands of days beforehand?

He would have shrugged in disbelief if anyone had told him that his life was about to change suddenly, and that the photograph on the sideboard, showing him standing in the bosom of his family, one hand casually resting on a chair, would be reproduced across every newspaper in Europe.

And finally, if he had searched his conscience, in all seriousness, for anything predisposing him to an eventful future, he would probably not have thought of a certain furtive, almost shameful emotion that disturbed him whenever he saw a train go by, a night train especially, its blinds drawn down on the mystery of its passengers.

As for daring to tell him to his face that at that very instant his employer, Julius de Coster the Younger, was sitting at a table in the bar known as the Petit Saint-Georges and assiduously getting drunk, it would have had no effect, nor piqued his curiosity, for Kees Poppinga had no taste for mystification, having his own fixed opinion of people and things.

And yet, against all probability, Julius de Coster the Younger was indeed at the Petit Saint-Georges.

Meanwhile in Amsterdam, in a suite at the Carlton Hotel, a certain Pamela was taking a bath, before leaving for the fashionable nightclub

Tuchinski's.

What did any of that have to do with Poppinga? Any more than the fact that in Paris, in a little restaurant in Rue Blanche, called Chez Mélie, a certain Jeanne Rozier, a redhead, was sitting at a table with a man named Louis, whom she was asking, as she helped herself to mustard:

‘You working tonight?’

Or that in Juvisy, in the Paris suburbs, not far from the railway goods yard, on the road to Fontainebleau, a garage owner and his sister Rose . . .

In fact, none of that existed yet! It was all in the future – the immediate future of Kees Poppinga who, that Wednesday in December, at eight o'clock in the evening, had absolutely no notion of any of this, and was about to smoke a cigar.

What he would never have admitted to anybody, since it might conceivably be taken for criticism of family life, was that after dinner, he had a very strong inclination to nod off to sleep. It was nothing to do with the food, since as in most Dutch families, their evening meal was a light one: tea, bread and butter, thin slices of ham and cheese, sometimes a dessert.

No, the offender was rather the stove, an imposing stove, the very best of its kind, with green ceramic tiles and heavy chrome fittings, a stove that was not merely a stove but, by its heat and its warm breath, the regulator, you might say, of the life of the household.

The cigar boxes were on the marble mantelpiece, and Poppinga took his time to choose one, sniffing it, feeling the tobacco with his fingers, because that is essential in order to appreciate a cigar, and also because that's how people have always done it.

Just the same way, the moment the table had been cleared, Frida, Poppinga's daughter, fifteen years old with auburn hair, would spread out her schoolbooks under the lamplight and look at them for a long time with her big dark eyes, which were either unfathomable or empty.

Things went on as usual. Carl, the younger child, thirteen years old, offered his forehead first to his mother, then to his father, kissed his sister goodnight, and went up to bed.

The stove was still roaring away and Kees asked out of habit:

‘What are you doing, Mama?’

He called her ‘Mama’ in front of the children.

‘I must bring my album up to date.’

She was forty years old and displayed the same gentleness and dignity as the whole household, people and objects. One could almost have added, as in the case of the stove, that she was the very best-quality Dutch housewife, and it was one of Kees' obsessions that he always spoke of first-class quality.

In fact, speaking of quality, the brand of chocolate which the family bought was the only thing that was second-best, and yet they still chose it, because every packet contained a picture, and these pictures took their place in a special album which, in a few years' time, would contain full-colour reproductions of all the flowers in the world.

Accordingly, Mrs Poppinga settled down in front of her famous album and started sorting out her coloured pictures, while Kees turned the knobs on the wireless set, so that from the outside world all that could be heard was a soprano singing, and sometimes the rattle of crockery from the kitchen where their maidservant was washing the dishes.

So heavy was the air that his cigar smoke did not even rise to the ceiling but hung like a cloud round Poppinga's face, and he sometimes waved it away with his hand, as one does spider's webs.

And hadn't all this been the same for the last fifteen years, hadn't they been fixed in the same attitudes?

It so happened that, a little before eight thirty, when the soprano had fallen silent and a monotonous voice was listing the values on the Stock Exchange, Kees uncrossed his legs, looked at his cigar, and declared hesitantly:

'I wonder whether everything is really in order aboard the *Ocean III*.'

Silence, the crackling of the stove. Mrs Poppinga had had time to stick two more pictures in her album and Frida to turn the page of her schoolbook.

'Perhaps I'd better go to take a look.'

And from that moment, the die was cast! Just long enough to smoke two or three millimetres of his cigar, to stretch, to hear the orchestra tuning up in the Hilversum radio auditorium – and Kees had been caught up in a spiral.

From now on, every single second would weigh more heavily than all the seconds he had lived hitherto, and each of his actions would take on as much significance as those of statesmen whose slightest doings are noted in the press.

The maidservant brought him his heavy grey overcoat, his fur gloves and his hat. She fitted his rubber galoshes over his shoes, as he docilely lifted

first one foot, then the other.

He kissed his wife and his daughter, noting again that he had no idea what Frida was thinking, if indeed she was thinking anything at all, then in the corridor he wondered whether to take his bicycle, a chrome-plated machine with several gears, one of the very best bicycles money could buy.

He decided to go on foot, left the house, then looked back at it with satisfaction. It was in fact a villa: he had drawn up the plans, supervised its construction, and if it was not the largest in the neighbourhood, he firmly believed it to be one of the best-designed and most harmonious.

The neighbourhood itself was a newly built one, a little out of town on the Delfzijl road, and surely the healthiest and most pleasant in Groningen.

Until this point, Kees Poppinga's life had been entirely composed of this kind of satisfaction, a genuine satisfaction because, say what you will, nobody can claim that an object of the finest quality is anything other than the finest quality, that a well-built house is not a well-built house, or that Oosting's pork-butcher is not the best in all Groningen.

It was cold, but a dry and bracing kind of cold. His rubber soles crunched on the hard-packed snow. Hands in his pockets, cigar between his teeth, Kees headed for the port, sincerely wondering whether all was well aboard the *Ocean III*.

It had not been a manufactured excuse. True, he was not unhappy to be walking in the cool night air, rather than dozing off in the stale warmth of the house. But he would not have allowed himself to think officially that any place in the world could be better than his home. That was precisely why his cheeks flushed when he heard a train go by, and he surprised a strange longing deep within himself, almost a kind of nostalgia.

The *Ocean III* was indeed a real boat, and Poppinga's nocturnal visit was a professional obligation. At the firm of Julius de Coster en Zoon, his post was that of head clerk and authorized signatory. Julius de Coster en Zoon was the largest firm of ship's chandlers, not only in Groningen but in all of Dutch Friesland, handling everything from rigging to fuel oil and coal, not to mention alcohol and provisions.

And it was the case that the *Ocean III*, which was due to sail at midnight so as to go through the canal before the tide, had sent in a large order late that afternoon.

Kees could see the boat far ahead of him, since it was a three-masted clipper. The banks of the Wilhelmine Canal were deserted, interrupted only

by mooring cables, which he nimbly stepped across. Then, like a man used to such things, he climbed the pilot's ladder and went unhesitatingly towards the captain's cabin.

This was, if you like, the last chance before Destiny struck. He could still have turned back, but he was unaware of that, and pushed open the door to find himself facing a furious giant, who proceeded to shower upon him every insult and oath in the book.

What had happened was totally unexpected to anyone who knew the firm of Julius de Coster en Zoon. The tanker which was due to moor alongside the boat at seven o'clock that evening to deliver the fuel oil – and Kees Poppinga had arranged that personally – had not arrived! Not only had it not come to the *Ocean III*, but there was no one on board, and the other provisions had not arrived either. Five minutes later, an apologetic Poppinga was climbing back down to the quayside stuttering that there must be some misunderstanding, and promising that he would deal with it.

His cigar had gone out. He regretted not having brought his bicycle and ran, yes ran, through the streets like a boy, so appalled was he by the thought that this boat, for want of its fuel, might miss the tide and possibly its voyage to Riga. Although Poppinga was not himself a sea-going man, he had passed the examinations to qualify as a long-haul captain, and he felt ashamed on behalf of the firm, of himself, and of the entire merchant navy, for what had happened.

Was Julius de Coster, by chance, as sometimes happened, still in the office? No, he was not, and Poppinga, out of breath, did not hesitate to head for his employer's private address, a calm and dignified house, but older and less practical than his own, like all the houses in the town centre. It was only as he stood on the threshold and rang the bell that he thought to throw away his extinguished cigar-butt and prepare a sentence . . .

Steps approached from a distance; a peephole opened and the indifferent eyes of a maidservant observed him. No, Mr Julius de Coster was not at home. So Kees, taking a bold decision, asked to see Mrs de Coster, who was a woman of high social rank, the daughter of a provincial governor whom no one would have dared mix up in a commercial affair.

The door finally opened. Poppinga waited for a long time at the foot of three marble steps, alongside a palm tree in a pot, then he was invited to go upstairs and into a room lit by an orange glow, where he found himself face

to face with a woman clad in a silk peignoir and smoking a cigarette in a long jade holder.

‘What was it you wanted? My husband went out early to deal with some urgent matter in the office. Why did you not try there?’

He would never forget that peignoir, nor the dark hair coiled on her neck, nor the supreme indifference of this woman, to whom he stammered his apologies before backing out.

...

Half an hour later, there was no hope of getting the *Ocean III* away on time. Kees had first returned to the office, thinking that he might perhaps have just missed his employer en route. Then he had started making his way back once more, this time taking a busier street, where the shops were still open because of the Christmas season. Someone clasped his hand.

‘Popinga!’

‘Claes!’

It was Dr Claes, a specialist in children’s diseases, and a fellow-member of the chess club.

‘Aren’t you coming to the tournament tonight? It looks as if the Pole is going to meet his match . . .’

No, he would not be coming. In any case, his chess evening was Tuesday and this was Wednesday. From running through the cold night air, his cheeks were pink, and his breath hot.

‘By the way,’ Claes went on, ‘Arthur Merkemans came to see me today —’

‘Has he no shame?’

‘That’s what I said to him.’

And Dr Claes went on his way towards the club, while Popinga felt weighed down by one more trouble. Why should anyone feel the need to mention his brother-in-law to him? Doesn’t every family have one member of whom they are in some sense ashamed?

Merkemans had not actually committed any crime. The worst thing he could be reproached with was having had eight children, but back then he had held down quite a good job, in a saleroom. Then one day he had lost it. He had remained unemployed for a long while, at first because he was too particular, but eventually he had taken anything on offer, and things had gone from bad to worse.

Now he was a familiar figure, because he went round touching people for money, telling them his hard-luck story and mentioning his eight children.

It was embarrassing. Poppinga felt a knot in his stomach and thought disapprovingly of this brother-in-law, who had let himself go and whose wife these days even went out shopping without a hat on.

Well, too bad! He stopped off to buy another cigar, and decided to go home via the station, which was hardly any further than by the canal. He knew he wouldn't be able to resist saying to his wife:

'Your brother's been to see Dr Claes. Again.'

She would understand. She would sigh, without replying. That was how it always was.

On his way, he passed St Christopher's Church, turned left down a calm street where the snow was banked up along the pavements and where the doorways all had heavy ornamental porches. He had been going to think about Christmas, but it wasn't worth it, since once he had passed the third gas lamp, he knew other thoughts would lie in wait for him.

Oh, nothing serious! Just a few seconds' discomfort, every time he passed that spot on his way home from the chess club . . .

Groningen is a strait-laced town where, unlike in cities such as Amsterdam, there is no risk of being propositioned by a woman in the street.

And yet, a hundred metres from the station, there is a house, just one, looking very respectable from the outside, prosperous indeed, but whose door opens at the slightest push.

Kees had never set foot inside. He had merely heard tell of it at his club. One way or another, he had always avoided being unfaithful to his wife.

Nonetheless, whenever he went past at night, his imagination became active, and this time he was more aroused, since he had just seen Mrs de Coster in her peignoir. He had only ever caught sight of her from a distance before, and dressed in city clothes. He knew she was no more than thirty-five years old, whereas Julius Coster the Younger was sixty.

He walked past the house . . . He paused only briefly as he saw two shadows moving behind the curtains on the first floor. He could already see ahead of him the railway station, from which the last train would depart at five past midnight. Before the station, on the right, he still had to pass a bar, the Petit Saint-Georges, which to him represented something similar to, if less exciting than, the house back up the street.

In times gone by, in the days of stage coaches, there had been a large inn, the Grand Saint-Georges, alongside which a small alehouse had sprung up calling itself the Petit Saint-Georges.

Now only the small bar was left, in a basement room, its windows level with the pavement, and it was in fact almost always empty, being frequented, when other places had closed, only by a few German or English sailors.

Popinga always glanced inside, in spite of himself, although there was nothing remarkable to see: tables made of blackened oak timbers, benches, stools, and at the back of the room a counter, behind which stood a huge barman, whose goitre prevented him wearing a collar.

Why did the Petit Saint-Georges give the impression of being a place of debauchery? Because it stayed open until two or three in the morning? Because the bottles of genever and whisky on the shelves were more numerous than elsewhere? Because it was below street level?

This time, as he always did, Kees glanced in, and the next moment he was pressing his nose against the window: to see better, to be sure he was not mistaken, or perhaps to persuade himself that he was indeed mistaken.

In Groningen, there are two categories of café: the *verlof*, where only soft drinks are served, and the *vergüning*, where alcohol is sold.

And Kees would have thought it dishonourable to set foot in a *vergüning* café. Had he not given up skittles because the skittle alley was in the back room of such an establishment?

The Petit Saint-Georges was one of the most *vergüning* of the *vergünings*. And yet, in that low-ceilinged room, a man sat drinking, a man who could be none other than Mr Julius de Coster the Younger in person!

If, at that moment, Kees had rushed back to the chess club, and announced to Dr Claes or anyone else that he had seen Julius de Coster in the Petit Saint-Georges, they would have looked at him sorrowfully and advised him to have his head examined. There are some people about whom one can allow oneself to make jokes. But Julius de Coster . . .

His goatee beard alone was the most chilling feature of Groningen. The way he walked! His dark clothes! And his famous headwear, a cross between a bowler and an opera hat!

. . . No! And it simply wasn't possible either that Julius de Coster had shaved off his beard! And inconceivable that he was wearing a brown suit too big for him!

As for being there, at a table in the Petit Saint-Georges, in front of a thick-bottomed glass which could contain nothing but genever . . .

But the man happened to look up towards the window, and then he too appeared surprised, as he leaned forward slightly, recognizing Poppinga, whose nose was still pressed against the glass.

Even more unheard of, he made a little beckoning gesture as if to say:
'Come on in!'

And Kees did go in, mesmerized, as animals are said to be by the gaze of snakes. He walked in and the giant barkeeper, polishing glasses behind the counter, called out:

'Can't you shut the door like everyone else?'

...

It was him, Julius de Coster. He gestured to a stool for his companion and murmured:

'I'll bet you went on board, didn't you?'

Then, without waiting for a reply, an expression he had never been heard to utter passed his lips:

'Screaming blue murder, are they?'

Then without pause:

'Well, you must have been spying on me, weren't you, to know I was here?'

What was especially disconcerting was that he showed no sign of annoyance, his tone held no bitterness, and he was smiling slightly in amusement. He motioned to the barman to fill up their glasses, and at the last moment changed his mind, preferring to keep the bottle on the table.

'Listen, Mr de Coster, tonight something . . .'

'Drink up first, *Mister Poppinga!*'

He did normally address Kees as Mr Poppinga, as was his practice for all the staff, even the lowliest storekeepers. But this time there was a calm irony behind it and he seemed to be enjoying his employee's discomfiture.

'If I'm telling you to drink up, and I warmly advise you to finish off the bottle if you can, it's because alcohol will help you to digest what I have to say. I didn't expect to have the pleasure of meeting you this evening. You will have noticed that I too have been drinking, which will give a delightful tone to our conversation . . .'

He was drunk! Poppinga would have sworn to that! But he gave the impression of being a man who was used to being drunk, and untroubled by it.

‘It’s inconvenient for the *Ocean III*, which is a good boat, and her contract says she should be in Riga seven days from now. But what is happening will be much more upsetting for other people, you for instance, *Mister Poppinga!*’

With these words, he helped himself to another drink, and Kees noticed a bulky packet alongside him on the bench.

‘All the more upsetting since you probably don’t have any savings, and you’re going to find yourself jobless and on the streets, like your brother-in-law.’

So he too had mentioned Merkemans?

‘Go ahead, drink up, please. You are such a sensible fellow that I feel able to tell you everything . . . Imagine, *Mister Poppinga*, that by tomorrow morning, the firm of Julius de Coster en Zoon will be facing charges of fraudulent bankruptcy and the police will be looking for me.’

It was fortunate that Kees had swallowed two glasses of genever one after another! He could tell himself that the alcohol was distorting his vision, that it was not Julius de Coster who was displaying that devilishly cynical smile, and stroking his freshly shaved chin with satisfaction.

‘You won’t understand everything I am about to say, because you are a true Dutchman, but later on you will think about it, *Mister Poppinga* . . .’

Every time he repeated the words *Mister Poppinga*, it was in a different tone of voice, as if he were relishing these syllables.

‘Let this be a lesson to you, first of all, that despite all your qualities and the excellent opinion you have of yourself, you are a pitifully poor head clerk of the firm, since you had noticed nothing. For the last eight years, *Mister Poppinga*, I have been engaging in speculative ventures, of which the least one can say is that they were very risky.’

The room was even warmer than Kees’s house, with the difference that here there was a brutal, aggressive kind of heat, belched out ruthlessly by a noxious cast-iron stove, like the ones you see in branch-line railway stations. The smell of genever hung in the air, the floor was strewn with sawdust, and there were wet rings on the surface of the table.

‘Go on, finish your glass, please, and tell yourself that you will always have that consolation. By the way, last time I saw your brother-in-law, I had

the feeling he had started to understand . . . So what happened, you went on board and—'

'I went round to your house.'

'Oh, so you saw the charming Mrs de Coster? Was Dr Claes there?'

'But—'

'Don't look so alarmed, *Mister Popinga*. For three years now, almost to the day, because it started one Christmas Eve, Dr Claes has been sleeping with my wife . . .'

He was drinking, and smoking his cigar with small puffs, and to Kees's eyes he was looking more and more like the Gothic devils that decorate the porches of some medieval churches, and from which one tries to distract children's eyes.

'I should say that for my own amusement, I've been going every week to Amsterdam to see Pamela . . . You remember Pamela, *Mister Popinga*?'

It was hard to believe he was really drunk, so calm was his behaviour, while Kees, like an imbecile, blushed at the name of Pamela.

Hadn't Popinga lusted after her, like everyone else? Just as there is only one disreputable house in Groningen, there is only one nightclub where dancing goes on until one in the morning.

He had never been inside it, but he had heard of Pamela, a bar-hostess, a buxom, lisping brunette, who had spent two years in Groningen and had paraded round the streets in extravagant outfits, while the local wives turned their heads away whenever they met her.

'Well, I'm the man who has been keeping Pamela. I've got her into rooms at the Carlton Hotel in Amsterdam, and she introduces me to some of her charming young lady-friends. Is the light beginning to dawn now, *Mister Popinga*? Not yet too drunk to hear what I'm saying? Make the most of it, I urge you. Tomorrow, when you come to look back on this, you will become another man and perhaps even do something with your life.'

And he was laughing! He carried on drinking. He refilled his glass and that of his companion, whose eyes were beginning to mist over.

'I know it's a lot to absorb all at once, but I shall not have the leisure to provide you with a second lesson! Take in as much of this as you can assimilate. Think about the poor little fool you have been. Look! You want me to prove it? I'll give you an example in our professional field. You have your long-haul captain's certificate, and you're proud of it. The firm of Julius de Coster owns five clippers, and you have special responsibility for

them. But you have not noticed that one of them never carries anything but contraband, and that another was sunk on my orders, for the sake of the insurance.'

From that moment, something unforeseen happened. Kees, contrary to his expectation, became almost supernaturally calm. Was it perhaps the effect of the alcohol? At any rate, from then on, he showed no reaction and seemed to be listening passively to everything he was being told.

And yet! Just the names of the five clippers belonging to the firm: *Éléonore I . . . Éléonore II . . . Éléonore III . . .* and so on up to five! Always having the given name of Mrs de Coster, the woman Kees had just seen in her peignoir, with a long cigarette-holder between her lips, the woman who, according to her husband, was sleeping with Dr Claes!

And that was not the full extent of this sacrilege. At a higher level than Julius de Coster the Younger and his wife, there existed a being who seemed to have been placed forever above all ordinary matters, Julius de Coster the Elder, the father of the man in front of him, the founder of the firm who, for all that he was now eighty-three, still occupied a chair every day in his austere office.

'I'm willing to bet' – his son was now saying – 'that you don't know how that rascal of a father of mine made his fortune. It was during the South African war. He sent over there a whole lot of faulty munitions that he'd picked up cheap from Belgian and German factories . . . And now he's completely gaga, you have to hold his hand to get him to sign anything. Another bottle, if you please, barman! Drink up, dear *Mister Poppinga*. Tomorrow, if you like, you can repeat all this to our worthy fellow-citizens. Because officially, I shall be dead!'

Kees must have been completely drunk by now, yet he missed not a word, nor a facial expression. It simply seemed to him that this scene was taking place in an unreal world he had chanced to wander into, and that once he went outside, he would be back in everyday life.

'In the end, I have to say, it's *you* I feel worst about. Of course, you yourself insisted on putting your savings into my business. I would have offended you if I had refused. And it was you who insisted on building yourself a house with a twenty-year bank loan, so now, if you fall behind with the annual payments . . .'

He suddenly gave chilling evidence of his unclouded mind, as he asked: 'Due at the end of December, if I'm not mistaken?'

He appeared sincerely sorry.

‘I promise you I did everything I could. I was just unlucky, that’s all. It was speculation in sugar that sank me, and I’d rather go and make a fresh start somewhere else than have to face all those solemn idiots. I beg your pardon, I don’t mean you. You’re a good fellow, and if you had been brought up differently . . . Your good health, my dear old Poppinga!’

This time, he hadn’t said ‘*Mister Poppinga*’.

‘Believe me! People aren’t worth all the trouble you go to to get them to think well of you. They’re stupid! They’re the ones who insist you put a virtuous face on things, but out there, it’s dog eat dog! I don’t want to upset you, but your daughter has suddenly come to mind – I saw her last week. Well, between ourselves, she looks so unlike you with her dark hair and her soulful eyes, that I wonder whether you *are* her father . . . But what does it matter? Or at any rate, it doesn’t matter if you play the cheating game yourself. Whereas if you insist on playing by the rules, and then get cheated . . .’

He was not speaking for his companion’s sake now, but for himself, and he concluded:

‘It’s so much safer to be the first to cheat! What do you risk . . .? Tonight, I’m going to leave Julius de Coster’s clothes on the canal towpath . . . Tomorrow, everyone will believe I have committed suicide rather than bear the dishonour, and the fools will spend God knows how many florins dragging the canal. But by then the five-past-midnight train will have taken me far away. Look here . . .’

Kees gave a start, as if emerging from a dream.

‘Try, if you’re not too drunk, to understand what I’m about to tell you . . . Above all, I want you to know that I’m not trying to buy you off. De Coster doesn’t do that to anybody, and if I’ve told you all this, it’s because I know you won’t be able to go and tell anyone else. That’s right, isn’t it? Now, I’ll put myself in your place. In reality, you don’t own a sou. And if I know anything about the people at the mortgage company, the first payment you miss, they’ll repossess your house. Your wife will be furious with you. Everyone will believe you must have been in league with me. You may find another post, you may not, in which case you’ll be reduced to the same sorry state as your brother-in-law, Merkemans. I’ve got a thousand florins in my pocket. If you stay here, I can’t do anything for you. You won’t get

out of this pickle with a mere five hundred florins. But if by chance, you've got the message by tomorrow . . . Here you are, old chap!'

And with an unexpected gesture, De Coster pushed half the bundle of notes across the table.

'Take it! It's not all I've got. I haven't burned quite all my boats and, before long, I'll be afloat again. Wait. There's a newspaper I have read for the last thirty-five years, and that I intend to go on reading . . . It's called the *Morning Post*. If you don't stay here, and if ever you are in need, put an advertisement in that paper signed "Kees". That'll be enough. And now you're going to give me a hand. I was feeling sorry for myself to be going off like this, all alone like a beggar . . . What do I owe you, barman?'

He paid the bill, picked up his packet by the string, and checked that his companion could stand upright.

'We won't go through streets that are well lit . . . Think about it, Poppinga. Tomorrow I'll be dead, which is the best thing that can happen to a man.'

They were walking past the famous 'house of ill repute', but Kees did not react, so preoccupied was he by his thoughts and by his concern to keep his balance. With a last reflex, he had tried to carry his employer's parcel, but the other man pushed his arm aside, saying, 'This way. It's quieter here.'

The streets were empty. Groningen was asleep, apart from the Petit Saint-Georges, the 'house' and the station.

The rest was a dream. They arrived on the bank of the Wilhelmine Canal, not far from one of the Éléonores, the *Éléonore IV*, which was loading a cargo of cheeses bound for Denmark. The snow was as hard as ice. Automatically, Kees held on to his employer, who was likely to slip, as he put the clothes from the packet down on the ground. He glimpsed for a moment the famous hat, but had no desire to laugh.

'Now, if you're still awake, you can accompany me to the train. I've bought a third-class ticket.'

It was a real night train, sleepy, sordid, standing abandoned at the end of a platform, while the stationmaster, in his orange cap, waited to blow the whistle before going to bed.

Some Italians – where had they come from? – had spread themselves over one compartment, amid their shapeless bundles, while a young man in a plush overcoat, preceded by two porters, was climbing with dignity into a first-class carriage and taking off his gloves to feel for change in his pockets.

‘Not coming with me?’

De Coster said that with a laugh, and yet Kees caught his breath. In spite of his drunken state, or perhaps because of it, he was understanding many things, and he would have liked to say . . .

But no! It wasn’t the moment . . . And anyway he hadn’t worked it out yet. Julius de Coster would think he was boasting.

‘No hard feelings, my poor fellow. That’s life, I can promise you. Think about that notice in the *Morning Post* – but not too soon, I’ll need some time to . . .’

The carriages gave a jolt at that minute, and moved forward, then back, and Kees could never remember how he got back home, or how he had seen for one last time the shadows on a curtain in the ‘house’ – on the second floor this time – or how, finally, he had undressed and slipped into bed without Mama noticing anything odd.

Five minutes later, the bed took off at alarming speed and Kees could only cling on to the sheets, with the desperate feeling that at any moment he was going to be tipped out into the Wilhelmine Canal, from which the crew of the *Ocean III* would make no effort to rescue him.



2.

In which Kees Poppinga, despite having slept on the wrong side, wakes up feeling cheerful and how he hesitates between Éléonore and Pamela

When by chance he had been lying on his left side, Kees usually slept badly. Feeling oppressed, his breath would become uneven, and he would toss and groan, waking Mrs Poppinga, who pushed him firmly into a better position.

But today, although he had been sleeping on his left side, he had no memory of a single bad dream. Better: he, who normally took some time to come to in the morning, suddenly found himself wide awake.

What had woken him, though he had not bothered to open his eyes, was the slight sound of the bedsprings, indicating that Mrs Poppinga was getting up. On other mornings, Kees would go back to sleep, thinking that he had a good half-hour in front of him.

Not this time! Once his wife was up, he even cautiously opened his eyes to watch her standing in front of the mirror and pulling pins out of her hair.

She did not know she was being observed, and her movements were careful to avoid waking her husband. She went into the bathroom and put on the light, so Kees could still see her all the time through the doorway.

In the street, the lamplighter had not yet passed to put out the gas lamps, but there was a regular crunching sound of spades shovelling snow. Downstairs, their maidservant, who had never been known to move about quietly, seemed to be battling with her stove and saucepans.

Mama, looking sleepy, had put on some long johns, with elastic round the knees to keep her warm. Then she walked about, thus dressed, brushing her teeth and spitting into the basin, pulling a face, and carrying out a multitude of small actions, without suspecting that she was being watched.

The alarm-clock trilled in their son's bedroom, and sounds began to come from that direction too, while Kees, lying comfortably on his back, decided coolly not to get up.

There! The first big decision of the day. He saw no reason to get up, since the firm of Julius de Coster had failed. He savoured in advance his wife's shock when he told her of his determination to stay in bed.

Too bad! She hadn't seen anything yet, poor Mama!

In fact, thinking of Mama, Kees had one memory that sprang immediately to mind. One day, five years earlier, he had bought a skiff, made of mahogany, which he had called *Zeedeufel*, *Sea Demon*, and which, though he said so himself, was a little gem, varnished, shining, with its brass fittings and elegant lines, more a display piece than a real boat.

Since it had cost him a great deal of money, Kees had felt a certain intoxication, and that evening he had complacently calculated everything they owned: house, furniture, cupboards full of linen, silver cutlery.

In short, that night, the Poppingas were so certain of their wealth that, as a joke, the two of them had envisaged the prospect of sudden ruin.

'I have sometimes thought about it,' Mama had declared with her usual imperturbable calm. 'First of all, we would have to sell everything and place the children in a good boarding school, one that's not too expensive. You, Kees, would surely be able to pick up a professional job on board a ship. And I would go to Java and look for a post as housekeeper in a big hotel. Remember Aunt Maria, who lost her husband? Well, that's what she did, and apparently she is well respected.'

He almost burst out laughing, as he said to himself:

'So now it's happened! We're ruined! Time to go and count the sheets and towels in a big hotel in Java . . .!'

Which only goes to show that when you try to imagine things in advance, you come up with something completely ridiculous. Because, in the first place, the villa would be repossessed, and everything they had would be sold. And it wasn't the moment, during a world-wide depression, to look for a job in the merchant navy.

In any case, Poppinga had no wish at all to do that. And if he had had to say off the cuff what he did want, he would have been obliged to say: Éléonore de Coster or Pamela!

For the moment, that was what surfaced in his mind from the events of the night before: Éléonore in her silk peignoir, with her long cigarette-

holder and her dark hair curling on the nape of her neck. Then the idea that Dr Claes, who was a friend, with whom he played chess . . .

And Pamela, in Amsterdam, who invited her young girlfriends round entirely for the pleasure of Julius de Coster, in his guise as a pasha.

The windows were growing light, glazed with frost. Their son had gone downstairs and would be eating breakfast, because his school started at eight. More slowly, and more methodically, like her mother, Frida would be tidying her room.

‘Kees, it’s half past seven!’ His wife was standing in the doorway and Poppinga made her repeat her call twice, before stretching and declaring:

‘I’m not getting up this morning.’

‘Are you ill?’

‘No, I’m not ill, but I’m not getting up.’

He felt like playing tricks. He was aware of the enormity of his decision and through half-closed eyes he was watching the reactions of Mrs Poppinga, who now came towards the bed, her features frozen with astonishment.

‘What’s the matter, Kees? Aren’t you going to the office today?’

‘No.’

‘Have you told Mr Julius de Coster?’

‘No.’

The strangest thing was that he realized that his attitude was not forced upon him, but corresponded to his true nature. Yes! This was how he should always have lived!

‘Listen, Kees . . . You’re not properly awake. If you feel ill, tell me honestly, but don’t frighten me for nothing.’

‘I’m not ill, and I’m staying in bed. Could you send me up some tea, please?’

And this, De Coster himself would not have believed. He thought he had crushed Poppinga with his confession, but Kees was not in the least crushed.

Simply amazed that another man, especially his boss, had had the same ideas as him, the same dreams rather, since in Kees’s case they had remained at the level of dreaming.

Take trains, for instance. He was no longer a child, and it wasn’t anything mechanical about them that attracted him. If he had a preference for night trains, it was because he sensed in them something strange, almost wicked . . . He had the impression that people who catch the night train are leaving

for ever, especially when he had seen poor families crowding into third-class compartments with their bundles.

Like the Italians last night.

So Kees had dreamed of being someone other than Kees Poppinga. And that was exactly why he had always been so very *much* Poppinga, too much himself indeed, exaggeratedly so, because he knew that if he slipped up on one little detail, nothing would stop him.

Evenings . . . Yes, evenings, when Frida was sitting down to her homework and his wife was sticking pictures in her album. When he fiddled with the wireless, smoking a cigar and feeling too hot. He could have stood up and said straight out:

‘How boring it is, family life!’

It had been to stop himself saying it, or even thinking it, that he had looked at the stove, repeating to himself that it was the best stove in Holland, that he had looked at Mama and persuaded himself that she was beautiful, and decided his daughter had dreamy eyes.

And it was the same when he went past the famous ‘house’. Probably if he had once gone inside, that would have been the end of everything . . . He would have carried on in that direction, and kept women like Pamela. He would perhaps have done forbidden things, since he had more imagination than De Coster the Younger.

The street door opened and shut, and he heard a bicycle bell, which meant Carl was off to school on his bike. In a quarter of an hour, it would be Frida’s turn.

‘Here’s your tea. It’s very hot. Are you sure you’re not ill, Kees?’

‘Absolutely sure.’

Which was an exaggeration, he now realized. As long as he had remained under the sheets, he had thought his body was perfectly at ease, but now, sitting up to drink his tea, he winced with a sharp pain at the back of his neck and felt suddenly dizzy.

‘You look very pale. You haven’t had any trouble over the *Ocean III*, have you?’

‘Me? No, not at all.’

‘And you won’t tell me what the matter is?’

‘Yes, I will tell you. *The matter is that I want a bit of bloody peace and quiet!*’

This was as shocking as meeting Julius de Coster in the Petit Saint-Georges. Never had such words been pronounced in their house, which must be shaking on its foundations. And the oddest thing was that he said it without any trace of anger, as coldly as if he were asking for more tea or sugar.

‘You’ll do me a favour, Mama, and not ask me any more questions. I’m forty years old, and I may just start taking control of my own life . . .’

She hesitated to leave the room, and could not resist plumping up the pillows behind his head, stopping halfway out of the room to look at him in distress, before she finally closed the door quietly.

Bet she’s going to start crying now, he thought as he heard her stop on the landing.

It was rather disconcerting to be there in his bed, at this time in the morning, on a weekday, without being ill. Frida went out in turn, and after that he lived through hours in his own house that he had never lived before: hearing the milk being delivered, then the women cleaning the downstairs rooms, things that he knew about only in theory.

The more desirable of the two women was Éléonore, without a doubt! On the other hand, he did not feel that he was on an equal footing with her. Certainly he was as good a man as Dr Claes, who was the same age as Kees and whom he regularly beat at chess. What was more, Claes smoked a pipe and most women do not like that.

Pamela would be easier. Especially now that he knew!

Fancy that, she had lived in Groningen for two years and he had never dared!

An idea struck him and he stood up and walked barefoot across the linoleum, feeling more than ever bewilderingly dizzy.

He wanted to be sure that his wife had not taken his suit to brush it, because if so, she would have felt in the pockets and found the five hundred florins.

His jacket was on a chair. He took the money and slipped it under his pillow, then almost fell asleep again, back in the warmth of the bed.

Yes, Pamela would be the better choice. Why had De Coster passed that remark about his daughter Frida, saying that she was dark-haired and did not look like him?

It was true. Still, it was difficult to imagine a woman like Mama deceiving him in the first year of their marriage!

Since the Spanish occupation, there had been plenty of dark-haired people in Holland. And recessive genes could jump generations, couldn't they?

But in any case, it didn't bother him. That was something that would have astonished Julius de Coster, who had thought *he* was the one doing the surprising. *It didn't bother him*. The moment he was no longer right-hand man in the firm and his villa no longer belonged to him, the moment a single detail had changed, the rest could collapse around him.

He was ready to start smoking a pipe like Claes, eating poor-quality cheese, and going into all the *vergüning* cafés in town to order a genever without a trace of shame in his voice.

A ray of sunshine was appearing, striking obliquely into the bedroom through the net curtain with its polka dots, then trembling in the mirror on the wardrobe. Downstairs, the two women were busy with buckets and cloths, and from time to time his wife would be cocking an ear and wondering what he was up to.

The doorbell rang. He heard muffled voices in the corridor, then Mrs Poppinga came upstairs and into the bedroom, and with an apologetic air said reproachfully:

'Someone has come for the key.'

The key to the De Coster office, of course! The staff must all be clustered outside the building, inventing wild surmises.

'Right-hand pocket of my jacket.'

'You haven't any message for them?'

'Not at all.'

'You don't want to send a word to Mr de Coster?'

'No.'

It was literally unheard of. Never would he have dared think of such a thing. Take, for example, the way they had talked about what it would be like to be ruined, as a way of giving themselves the illusion of being rich: they had only been able to come up with stupid suggestions, like working in a hotel in Java or as second officer on some ship.

Not on your life! Not that or anything else! Since it was over, it was over, once and for all, and he had to seize the opportunity.

He even regretted now that he had not had the presence of mind, the evening before, to say this to De Coster. He had merely let the man speak to him. And his employer had taken him for a fool, or at least a timid fellow,

incapable of making a decision, whereas his decision had almost been taken.

He should simply have said to him:

‘Do you know what I propose to do for a start? I’m going to Amsterdam to find Pamela.’

Yes, that was an old score he had to settle. Perhaps it was not very serious; but it was the most pressing, since what humiliated Kees most was never having had the courage, when he walked every week past a certain house, blushing like a guilty schoolboy, to . . .

So, that was decided: Pamela first. And then . . .

Then, he’d see. Kees might not know what he would do, but he was perfectly clear about what he would *not* do, and that too had gone through his mind the night before, although he had not had the confidence to speak.

Had De Coster not referred to Arthur Merkemans? And had Claes not also mentioned him, seeming to say:

‘Your brother-in-law came round to scrounge some money again. What a sad case!’

So Kees would *never* become a second Merkemans. He knew how things were in Groningen better than anyone. Hardly a week went by than people who had better qualifications than his own came applying for a job. And the worst ones were precisely those who had elegant, if well-worn clothes, and who sighed:

‘I was the director of such-and-such a firm. But I’d accept anything, I have a wife and children to support.’

They went from company to company, briefcase in hand. Some of them tried to sell vacuum cleaners or life insurance.

‘No!’ Kees said out loud, looking at his reflection in the distant mirror.

He wouldn’t wait for his suits to be worn out, his shoes in holes, or for his friends at the chess club to feel so sorry for him that they waived his membership fee, as had happened for one member, after a vote by the committee in a spirit of universal generosity.

At any rate, there was no question of anything like that. It was true that he would never have been able to initiate what had happened.

But since it *had* happened all the same, best to take full advantage . . .

‘What is it now?’ he cried.

‘Mrs de Coster has sent to ask if you know anything about her husband. Apparently he didn’t come home last night, and . . .’

‘Well, what am I supposed to do about that?’

‘Shall I tell her you don’t know?’

‘Tell her she can go to the devil, and her fancy man too!’

If Mrs Poppinga did not know how things stood now . . .

‘And shut the door, for goodness’ sake. And tell the maid not to make all that din with her bucket . . .’

He had a headache, and called his wife back to ask for an orange, since he had a sour taste in his mouth and his tongue felt furred.

The ray of sunshine was wider. It was evident that outside the weather was dry, cold and sharp, and sounds travelled to him from the port, the fog horns of boats reaching the first bridge on the Wilhelmine Canal calling to be let through. Was the *Ocean III* still alongside? Probably. The captain must have had to buy his fuel oil from a competitor, Wrichton, no doubt, who would be wondering what that could mean.

In the office, the clerks would be at a complete loss and waiting for Kees to arrive.

So – he liked recapitulating, savouring the pleasure in advance – first Pamela. Julius de Coster had told him she lived in a suite of rooms in the Carlton Hotel.

After which, with his five hundred florins, he too would take a train, a night train, The North Star, for example.

Would it be long before Julius de Coster’s clothes were found? There was a shop selling fishing tackle near the place they had been left. The black hat would stand out against the snow on the bank.

‘Listen, Mama, if you disturb me again—’

‘Kees! Something terrible has happened! Incredible! Your boss has drowned himself. He—’

‘Well, what’s that got to do with me?’

As he spoke, he was looking at himself in the mirror, for reassurance that his face was remaining strictly expressionless. It amused him! He had always looked at himself in mirrors, even when he was a small boy. He would strike one attitude, then another. He would correct details.

Perhaps, deep down, he had always been an actor, and for fifteen years he had decided to project a worthy and untroubled image, that of a stolid Dutchman, sure of himself, of his honourability, his virtue, and of the high quality of everything he possessed.

‘How can you talk like that, Kees? Didn’t you understand what I said? Julius de Coster has committed suicide by throwing himself into the canal —’

‘So what?’

‘You’ll have me thinking you knew something about this.’

‘Why on earth should I be concerned, because a man has committed suicide?’

‘But, he was . . . It was your boss who . . .’

‘He’s free to do what he wants, isn’t he? I asked you to let me sleep.’

‘That’s impossible; there’s one of the staff downstairs wanting to see you.’

‘Tell him I’m asleep.’

‘The police will probably be round to ask you questions.’

‘That will be time enough to wake up.’

‘Kees! You’re frightening me! You don’t seem yourself! Your eyes look strange.’

‘Send me up some cigars.’

At this point, she concluded that her husband was seriously ill, overworked at least, and perhaps a little deranged. In a resigned voice, she ordered the maid to take up a box of cigars, since it was better to humour him.

She whispered for a long while in the corridor with the man from the office, who went off with downcast face.

‘Sir doesn’t feel well?’ the maid thought she should whisper, as she entered the room.

‘Sir has never felt better! Who told you that . . .?’

‘Madam did . . .’

It must have been ten o’clock and a dozen or so boats would be unloading at the port at this hour of the day. That would admittedly be a fine sight, especially in the sunshine, and he regretted not seeing it, particularly since most of the vessels had green, red or blue streamers, which would be reflected in the water of the canal, and some of them would be taking advantage of the windless air to spread their sails out to dry.

From his office, other mornings, he had been able to see them. He knew all the captains and all the mariners. He also knew the sound of every fog horn, and could say:

‘Aha, the *Jesus Maria* is coming through the second bridge. It’ll be here in half an hour!’

Then at eleven o’clock precisely, the office boy would bring him a cup of tea and two biscuits.

And all that time, Julius de Coster the Elder would be in his office, alone, behind the padded doors. To think that no one had noticed that he was wandering in his wits! He was installed in an armchair, like a mummy, or like the sign outside the business. Customers were only permitted to see him for a few seconds at a time, and mistook for wisdom what was a total absence of understanding.

Kees shifted in his bed, which was becoming damp. His pyjama jacket was wet under the arms. Yet he hesitated to get up, because then he would have to act.

Lying there in his bedroom, he could do anything he wanted to in his mind’s eye, and Pamela seemed within easy reach; even Éléonore de Coster scarcely intimidated him, despite her haughty cigarette-holder.

But if he was up and dressed in the grey suit belonging to Kees Poppinga, washed and freshly shaved, his fair hair smoothed down with brilliantine, what would he feel like then?

Already he was struggling a little against his curiosity, and indeed a more confused feeling, the temptation to go down and take charge of what was happening. The captain of the *Ocean III* was quite capable – being, as Kees knew, a loud-mouthed and aggressive man – of stirring up the entire port and demanding compensation.

And what if the police really did turn up at the offices? That was so unprecedented that it was hard to see what would happen. The entire ground floor was taken up by storage bays, with goods piled up to the ceiling and warehousemen in their blue overalls.

In one corner there was a glassed-in room, one window looking down on the port while the other three gave a view of the stores: this was Kees’s office, and once in there, it was as if he were the conductor of an orchestra.

On the first floor there were more storage bays and offices; and further offices again on the second floor, above the two-metre-wide band painted on the outer wall, with the firm’s name in black and white lettering: *Julius de Coster en Zoon: Ships’ Chandlers*.

He managed not to get up, but he was now irritated that he had been left so long alone – although he had clearly asked not to be disturbed.

What were the two women doing downstairs? Why couldn't he hear them any more? And why weren't they coming to ask him questions about his boss's suicide?

Of course, he would tell them nothing. But it vexed him that nobody had appealed to him so far.

He ate his orange, without a knife, threw the peel on the floor to annoy Mama, and settled back down between the sheets, hugging his pillow, closing his eyes and forcing himself to think of Pamela and everything he would do with her.

A train's whistle reached his ears like a promise. In his half-awake state, he decided not to leave during the day, which would not be atmospheric enough, but to wait, if not for night, at least for darkness, which would fall at about four o'clock.

Pamela was a brunette, like Éléonore. She was plumper than Mrs de Coster. As for Mrs Poppinga, she was certainly sturdy, but not plump. She always felt shy when Kees became amorous at night, and jumped at any noise, haunted by the thought that the children might hear.

Kees thought as hard as he could about Pamela, then, in spite of himself, unconsciously, he started to visualize images of the De Coster en Zoon offices, different corners of the port, boats loading or unloading, and when he realized what he was doing, he turned heavily on to his other side and started again:

'When I get to her rooms at the Carlton, I'll say to her . . .'

And he went over, second by second, the events as he predicted them.

'Papa?'

He must have gone to sleep, since he gave a start and looked in amazement at his daughter, who was snivelling.

'What have you done to Mama?'

'Me?'

'She's crying. She says you're not behaving normally, that something terrible is happening.'

How cunning of her!

'Where is she, your mother?'

'In the dining room. We're just going to eat. Carl's back home. Mama didn't want me to come up.'

Frida was crying without crying, which was one of her specialities. As a very small girl, she had had this habit of shedding tears for no reason,

seeming to be a victim of the cruelty of the world. At the drop of a hat, for a stern glance, she would break down.

But it was so automatic, and so predictable, that you wondered whether she was really upset.

‘Is it true that Mr de Coster is dead?’

‘What’s that to do with me?’

‘Mama thinks you are ill . . .’

‘Me, ill?’

‘She wants to call Dr Claes, but she’s afraid you’ll be angry if she does . . .’

‘And she’s damn well right. I don’t need Dr Claes or anyone else.’

What a strange girl she was. Kees had never understood her, today less than ever. What was she doing there, looking at him lying in bed, with those big frightened eyes? Had he ever done her any harm?

And besides all that, despite her tears, she had a remarkable faculty for coming down to earth.

‘What shall I tell Mama? Will you be down for lunch?’

‘No, I won’t.’

‘Should we start eating without you?’

‘Yes, that’s right. Eat! Cry your eyes out! But for the love of God, leave me in peace.’

It wasn’t that he felt remorse. But it was still awkward. He would have done better to leave the house this morning, as if nothing had happened, letting them think he was going to his office as usual.

Now, he was not too sure what he was going to do. He could foresee obstacles. And above all, he feared the arrival of his brother-in-law, Merkemans, who would come along full of goodwill to offer his help. Because that’s what he was like! Nobody could die in this neighbourhood without his volunteering for the wake.

‘Go and eat. Leave me alone.’

If only he could have had a glass or three of alcohol!

But there wasn’t any in the house. Just a bottle of bitters, for special occasions, or when someone turned up unexpectedly. And that was under lock and key in the left-hand part of the sideboard.

‘Goodbye, Frida.’

‘Goodbye, Papa.’

She didn't understand that he was saying this in a special way, nor did she realize that he was following her to the door with his eyes, then burying his face in the pillow.

In fact, he was at a loss. He was finding it very difficult to think about Pamela and all the rest of it.

Luckily, at two o'clock they told him that the police were now at the De Coster offices, and wanted to speak to him.

He dressed with care, looked at himself for a while in the mirror, went downstairs and lingered near his wife for some time.

'Do you think perhaps I ought to come with you?' she ventured to say.

That was what saved him. He was on the point of hesitating again. But the fact that, for no reason, she sensed danger, the fact that she was preparing to face up to it . . .

'I'm quite old enough to take care of things like this myself.'

Her eyes were red, and so was her nose, as always when she had been crying. She dared not look him in the face, which proved there was something going on inside her head.

'Are you taking your bicycle, my dear?'

'No.'

She only rarely addressed him familiarly, but it happened on special occasions.

'What are you crying for?' he asked impatiently.

'I'm not crying.'

She wasn't crying, but big tears were rolling down her cheeks.

'You silly thing!'

She would never understand what he meant, she would never realize that it was the most affectionate thing he had said to her in his life.

'You won't be too late back, will you?'

The stupid part of it was that he was on the point of weeping himself. The five hundred florins were in his pocket. But he hadn't touched the two hundred florins that were upstairs in the bedroom, ready to pay a bill due in two days' time.

'You've got your gloves?'

No, he'd forgotten them. She brought them to him, and didn't kiss him goodbye, because that was not their usual practice. She was content to stay on the doorstep, leaning forward a little, as he walked away, making the snow crunch under his rubber galoshes.

He found it the hardest thing in the world not to turn round.



3.

Concerning a little notebook bound in red morocco, purchased for a florin, one day when Poppinga had won at chess

The train was a quarter of an hour out of Groningen. Since it was now half past four and already dark, there wasn't the distraction of looking out of the windows. Kees Poppinga was sitting in a second-class compartment with two other people: a skinny little man who must be an official or a legal clerk, and in the opposite corner a middle-aged lady in deep mourning.

Kees's hand met by chance, in his pocket, a little notebook bound in red morocco, with gold leaf on the pages, which he had bought for a florin in order to record his most difficult chess matches.

His action was not in any way remarkable. Kees had nothing better to do. In the notebook, there were only two chess games written out, that is two pages covered with the conventional notations.

So it happened that he took out the pencil fitting inside the spine and wrote:

Left Groningen by the 16.07 train.

After which he put the notebook back in his pocket, taking it out only after Sneek station to add:

That stop was too short to be able to get a drink.

Much later, that notebook and the notes it contained would be cited by specialists on mental illness to prove that by the time he left Groningen, he was already insane!

Was his wife insane? A woman who had carefully preserved her diary from when she was a young girl, and who, if she had no images to stick in her album, wrote with a straight face:

Bought new shoes for Carl. Frida had a haircut.

In fact, the notebook would not be the only thing. The people who had been travelling alongside him, and who for the moment were paying no attention to him, would all, later, remember significant details.

And yet nothing about his behaviour would have aroused curiosity. He was calm. Perhaps he was even unnaturally calm? He noticed this himself, and it reminded him of two episodes in his life when he had displayed the same involuntary cool demeanour.

He recalled the first occasion because of the red leather notebook, since it concerned a game of chess. One evening, at the club, he had won three matches in a row, when old Copenghem, who couldn't stand Kees, had started to laugh at him.

'It's easy, isn't it, if you only play against people weaker than you?'

Stung, Kees had answered him back. They had ended up with a challenge, and Kees finally proposed to play Copenghem without one bishop and one rook.

He could still see that match, one of the most famous in the club's history. Although Copenghem was an excellent player, Popinga pretended to be quite confident and even, something that made his opponent fume with anger, strolled round the room between moves. On a table near him was a glass of Munich beer, a barrel of which had just been delivered.

After an hour, during which Popinga had maintained his pose of aggressive irony, the other man suddenly, with a thin smile, checkmated him.

This was the most disagreeable outcome possible. Twenty or more people had been watching the game, and witnessing Popinga's show of bravado.

But the latter did not flinch, neither going pale nor blushing. On the contrary, he maintained an unreal calm and said without hostility:

'These things happen, don't they?'

At the same time, he had picked up, without seeming to, one of the bishops from the board. The set, made of ivory and known all over Groningen, belonged to Copenghem himself, who claimed he could only play with his own pieces.

Popinga had chosen the black bishop. A glance round had enabled him to make his calculations and, an instant later, he had let it drop into his beer glass.

Another game was about to start. People realized that the bishop was missing, and looked everywhere, asking the waiter for help, and imagining every possible hiding-place except the glass of dark beer, which Kees took good care not to drink, and which someone must have emptied out later unwittingly, since Copenghem never got his bishop back.

And throughout the search, Kees had kept his pose of absolute calm, just as in the train today, while he thought about the clever folk of Groningen on whom he was playing a good trick by disappearing.

Which did not prevent the lady in mourning clothes from declaring, two days later:

‘He had a hunted expression. Twice he laughed out loud to himself!’

No, he didn’t laugh, but he did smile. The first time because of the Copenghem incident. The second time because of the oxtail.

That was more recent. It dated from the previous year, when Jef Van Duren had been appointed to a chair in the Faculty of Medicine. Van Duren, an old friend of his, had given a grand dinner. While they were serving the vermouth, Kees had gone into the kitchen, where he was in the habit of teasing Maria, the maidservant, a luscious-looking girl.

But when he had tried to steal a kiss, she had said:

‘Since you just want to fool about, I’ll come back when you’ve gone away.’

And she went down to the cellar to busy herself with something.

It was all the more humiliating since Maria was practically the only woman to whom Kees allowed himself to make advances, and every time it brought his blood racing to the surface.

However, he had remained calm, terribly calm. And in the same vein as with the chess bishop and the beer, he had noticed a saucepan on the stove full of oxtail soup – a dish the Van Durens only served on high days and holidays. On a shelf nearby was a row of containers, two of them marked ‘salt’. He opened one of them, and poured into the oxtail soup a good proportion of the contents. After which he returned with an innocent air to the drawing room.

The effect was much more amusing than he had predicted. The container marked ‘salt’ had held, heaven only knew why, powdered sugar, and for

some moments the faces round the table were aghast, grimacing, as the guests tried another spoonful without being able to decide what the matter was.

And that was the calm demeanour he was showing today. At six o'clock, he left the train at Stavoren, where he had no time to buy a drink, although he had long been feeling thirsty. At Stavoren, he had just time to board the ferry across the Zuyderzee: luckily, on board ship, refreshments were served.

'Two glasses of genever,' he said in the most natural way in the world, to the steward.

He asked for two since he knew he would drink them both, and it was not worth making the steward come the whole length of the boat twice. The evening before, Julius de Coster had after all insisted the bottle was left on their table and the barman at the Petit Saint-Georges had not objected.

So why did the same steward declare later:

'He looked completely insane, and he ordered two glasses of genever at the same time.'

After the forty-minute crossing, he caught another train, at Enkhuizen, for Amsterdam, reaching the city a few minutes after eight in the evening. The last leg of the trip had been made in a compartment with two cattle-dealers who were discussing their business and regarding him warily, as if he might be a competitor.

But nobody, even himself, suspected at this stage the terrible celebrity which he would acquire within the next few hours. He was wearing grey as usual. He was carrying, out of habit, his leather briefcase, which he always took to the office.

In Amsterdam, he did not hesitate for a moment before heading towards the Carlton, exactly as he had thrown the chess bishop in the beer and tipped the sugar into the oxtail soup.

'Is Miss Pamela in?'

Nothing, absolutely nothing, distinguished him from any other nondescript visitor, except perhaps his exceptional calm.

'What name shall I say?' the uniformed night porter asked.

'Julius de Coster.'

The man paused, looked at him, then said quietly:

'Forgive me, but you are not Mr de Coster.'

'How do you know that?'

‘Mr de Coster comes every week, so I know him.’

‘And how do you know I am not *another* Mr de Coster?’

The porter nevertheless said into the telephone: ‘Hello? Miss Pamela? There’s a gentleman here who says he’s come on behalf of Mr Julius de Coster. Should I send him up?’

The bellhop suspected nothing.

Pamela, who was arranging her hair in front of a mirror, called out ‘Come in!’ in a quite ordinary voice, then turned round, because, although she had heard the door open and shut again, nobody had spoken.

She saw Kees Poppinga standing there, briefcase under his arm and hat in hand, and she murmured:

‘Please, sit down.’

To which he replied:

‘Thank you, but no.’

They were in one of the hundred or more suites of similar rooms in the Carlton. The door leading to the bathroom was open and the light on. An evening gown was spread out on the bed.

‘Did De Coster send you with a message? Do you mind if I go on doing my hair? I’m late. By the way, what time is it?’

‘Half past eight. Plenty of time.’

And he put down his briefcase and hat, took off his coat and practised a smile, looking in the mirror.

‘You probably don’t remember me, but I often used to see you in Groningen. I might add that for two years now, I have desired you . . . So yesterday, Julius de Coster and I were chatting, and I’ve come—’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t you understand? I’ve come because the situation has changed from when you lived in Groningen.’

He had moved closer, and was standing behind her, which was making her feel uncomfortable, although she carried on fixing her dark hair.

‘It would take too long to explain. The main thing is that I’ve decided to come and spend an hour with you.’

...

When he left the room he was even calmer, if possible. There were five floors to go down, and he did not take the lift. It was only when he reached

the ground floor that he realized he had left his briefcase in Pamela's bedroom, and wondered if the porter would notice it.

Kees was clear-headed, since he realized that the man was looking at his empty hands!

'I left my briefcase upstairs,' he said non-committally. 'I'll be back for it tomorrow.'

'You don't want me to send the bellhop up?'

'No, thank you, it's not worth it.'

He made only one faux pas, but that was because he was not used to grand hotels: he took a quarter florin from his pocket and gave it to the porter.

Ten minutes later, he was at the railway station. The fast train to Paris was not until 11.26, in two hours' time, and he spent the interval wandering along the platforms looking at the stationary trains.

At 10.45 precisely, a young dancer who went out every evening with Pamela arrived at the Carlton, and asked:

'Isn't she down yet? I've been waiting for her in the restaurant for an hour.'

'I'll call her room.'

The porter let the phone ring once, twice, three times. And said with a sigh:

'I haven't seen her go out, though.'

He called the bellhop who was passing.

'Nip up and see if Miss Pamela is asleep.'

On the station platform, Poppinga did not show the least sign of impatience. He was pacing about as he waited for his train, amusing himself by watching the passengers walk past.

The bellhop came running down several flights of stairs and collapsed on to an armchair, panting out:

'Quickly – up there!'

He had left the lift where it was, and they had to walk up. Pamela was stretched out on the bed, a towel knotted round her face as a gag. They had to notify the hotel manager and call a doctor. By the time the police arrived, it was 11.30 and the Paris train had just left.

...

This time it was a real night train, like those that haunted Poppinga's dreams, a train with sleeping compartments, curtains at the windows, little lamps, and travellers speaking a variety of languages, an international train, what was more, crossing two frontiers in a few hours.

He had bought a second-class ticket and found a car where there was only one other traveller, a man who was already lying full length on a banquette, and whose face he could not see.

Kees was not sleepy, but did not wish to sit up either, so he walked up and down the train a few times, slowly, trying to see inside the compartments and guess at their occupants.

The inspector punched his ticket without looking at him. The Belgian police merely glanced at his identity card, and he took advantage of the stop at customs to write in his notebook:

Took Paris train at 23.26 from Amsterdam, travelling second-class.

A little later, he felt the need to write more:

I really can't understand why Pamela laughed at me when I said I had to have her. Well, too bad! I couldn't just leave like that. She's got the message by now.

If only she had smiled, or made an ironic remark! Or if she had even been angry! But no. After looking Kees up and down, she had burst out laughing, hysterical, uncontrolled laughter that went on and on, making her bosom heave so that she was even more alluring.

'I forbid you to laugh,' he had said severely.

But that only made her laugh all the more, until tears poured from her eyes, and he had grabbed her wrists.

'Stop laughing, now!'

He pushed her roughly towards the bed, and she fell across it.

As for the towel, it just happened to be lying there, alongside her evening gown.

'Tickets, please!'

This time it was a Belgian inspector who did, in spite of everything, glance curiously at this passenger standing in the corridor despite the cold. But was that enough to prompt any misgivings . . . ?

In the compartment, Poppinga's travelling companion had woken up briefly at the frontier and Kees had been able to see his nondescript face, with its little moustache.

It was a strange night, all the same, almost as disturbing as the one before, and the hours spent at the Petit Saint-Georges listening to Julius de Coster. What would he say now, Julius the Younger, if he could see him?

Would Pamela press charges? In that case, since they would find his briefcase in her room, the name Poppinga would be all over the newspapers.

But that was surely completely unthinkable? So much so that it was impossible for him to consider the consequences. Frida, for example, was at a convent school. Would they keep on the daughter of a man who . . .

And at the chess club! Copenghem's face! Or that of Dr Claes, who must think himself the only man capable of having a mistress. And . . .

He half-shut his eyes. Not a feature of his face moved. Sometimes through the windows he saw lights, or heard the louder reverberation as the train went through a station. He guessed at a large plain covered with snow, in the middle of which was a little house, still lit up deep into the night, God only knew why, perhaps because of a birth or a death.

Was it for the best that he had forgotten his briefcase at Pamela's? he wondered. Every moment, he felt the urge to jot down something in his little red notebook.

At the French frontier, he got out on to the platform and asked if the bar was open, had to take a roundabout route because of the customs office, drank a large cognac, and noted hastily in his book:

I register that alcohol has no effect on me.

The last leg of the journey was the longest. He had tried to strike up a conversation with the man in his compartment, who was a broker in precious stones. But this man, who did the trip twice a week, had his regular routine and preferred to sleep.

'You don't know whether the Moulin Rouge will still be open, do you?' Poppinga nevertheless asked him.

He had a desire to see people's faces and started walking along the corridors again, stepping across the moving plates between carriages, and pressing his face up against the windows of compartments where people were asleep.

The Moulin Rouge or anywhere else. If he had mentioned the Moulin Rouge, it was because he had read so much about it.

He could already see himself in a nightclub amply furnished with mirrors and red plush seats, a champagne bucket on the table, and beautiful girls

with low-cut necklines around him . . . He would remain unmoved. The champagne would have no more effect on him than the genever or the cognac had. And he would give himself the surreptitious pleasure of uttering sentences that his female companions would not be able to understand.

Suddenly, without warning, Gare du Nord, the great draughty station forecourt, the exit, a taxi waiting.

‘To the Moulin Rouge!’ he ordered.

‘No luggage?’

The Moulin Rouge was closed, but the car stopped in front of another cabaret, where a porter hurried out to meet Poppinga. No one would have guessed that this was the first time in his life he had set foot in such a place. He went in unhurriedly, looked calmly around, then selected his table, without taking any notice of the head waiter.

‘Champagne and a cigar!’

And there he was! Everything had happened just as he had decided and he found it entirely natural that a woman in a green dress should come to sit beside him, murmuring, ‘May I?’

He said:

‘Be my guest!’

‘Are you a foreigner?’

‘I’m Dutch, but I speak four languages, my own, French, English and German.’

What a magnificent form of relaxation! And the strangest thing, once again, was that the slightest details corresponded to what he had foreseen.

It was almost as if he were already familiar with this cabaret, with its red plush seats, its jazz band whose fair-haired saxophonist was surely from the north, perhaps a Dutchman like himself, and this redhead, who now put her elbows on the table and asked him for a cigarette.

‘Waiter,’ he called, ‘some cigarettes.’

A little later, he took his notebook out of his pocket and asked his companion:

‘What’s your name?’

‘My name? You want to write down my name? Funny idea. Well, if it makes you happy, Jeanne Rozier. But look, this place is about to close.’

‘Never mind.’

‘What do you want to do?’

‘Go to your place.’

‘No, that’s impossible. But a hotel room, if you like.’

‘All right.’

‘You’re very easy-going, aren’t you, sonny boy?’

He smiled tightly. It was funny, but he couldn’t have said why.

‘Do you come to Paris often?’

‘This is the second time in my life. The first time was on my honeymoon.’

‘And your wife’s with you this time?’

‘No, I left her at home.’

He was tempted to burst out laughing. He called the head waiter over to order more champagne.

‘So you like the little ladies, do you?’

This time he did laugh, and said:

‘Not the *little* ones, no!’

She didn’t understand. But Pamela was not at all little. She was as tall as him! And as for Éléonore de Coster she stood one metre seventy.

‘Well, you certainly seem to be in a good mood. You’re in business?’

‘I don’t know yet.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing. You’ve got freckles. That’s nice.’

What he liked above all was to watch as his companion glanced furtively at him, trying in vain to make him out. She did have freckles under her eyes, yes, and striking red hair, olive skin and wide lips. He had only ever met one redhead before, the wife of one of his chess club friends, a tall, thin woman who squinted and had five children.

‘Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘No reason. I just think it’s marvellous to be here. I’m thinking of Pamela’s face when—’

‘Who’s that?’

‘Never mind. You don’t know her.’

‘How about paying the bill and leaving? Everyone’s waiting to get to bed.’

‘Waiter! Change me these florins, please.’

And he pulled the five hundred florins from his pocket and gave the entire bundle to the head waiter with a nonchalant air.

He was tired, in spite of everything. There were moments when he felt an irresistible desire to stretch out on a bed, but it wasn't worth making a day like this shorter by dropping off to sleep.

'Why can't I come and sleep at your place?'

'Because I have a gentleman friend.'

He looked at her suspiciously.

'What's he like? Is he old?'

'No, he's thirty.'

'What does he do?'

'He's in business.'

'Ah. Well, so am I.'

He was understanding himself more and more, enjoying himself, delighting in his own words and gestures, and in his face glimpsed in a mirror.

'Here we are, sir.'

That did not prevent him carefully counting his money and remarking:

'A poor exchange rate. In Amsterdam I'd have got point three more.'

Outside, Jeanne Rozier, now wearing a squirrel fur coat, looked at him, with a last-minute hesitation.

'Where are you staying?'

'Nowhere. I came straight from the station.'

'And your luggage?'

'I haven't got any.'

She stood for a moment, wondering whether she might not do better to drop him.

'What's the matter?' he asked, surprised at her attitude.

'Nothing. Come along, there's a hotel in Rue Victor-Massé which is clean . . .'

There was no snow on the ground in Paris. It wasn't freezing. Poppinga felt as light as the champagne he had been drinking. As for his companion, she went into the hotel as if it were her home, and called through a glass partition:

'It's only me, don't worry. I'm taking room 7.'

She turned back the counterpane herself, locked the door, and gave a little sigh.

'Aren't you going to get undressed?' she called from the bathroom.

Why not, after all? He could do anything he liked.

He was as docile and cheerful as a child. He wanted everyone to be happy.

‘Are you staying long in Paris?’

‘Perhaps for good.’

‘But you came without any luggage.’

She felt uneasy and was undressing with some regret, while he, sitting on the bed, looked at her with an amused expression.

‘What are you thinking?’

‘Nothing. That’s a pretty petticoat. Is it silk?’

She slipped between the sheets, still wearing her slip, left the light on and waited.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked after a moment.

‘Nothing at all.’

He was simply finishing his cigar, lying on his back and looking up at the ceiling.

‘You’re not worried, are you?’

‘No.’

‘Do you mind if I put the light out?’

‘No.’

She switched it off and sensed him alongside her, in the same position, unmoving, his lips pursed round his cigar, making a little red glow in the dark.

She was the one who was restless.

‘Why did you come here with me?’ she asked, after tossing and turning a few times.

‘Well, isn’t it nice here?’

He could feel her warm body near him, but it brought him a purely abstract pleasure, since he was saying to himself:

‘If only Mama could see me now . . .’

Then abruptly, he got up, switched on the light, went over to his jacket, took out the notebook and asked:

‘What’s the address?’

‘What address?’

‘This place, where we are.’

‘It’s 37a, Rue Victor-Massé. You really need to write all this down?’

Yes! Just as some travellers collect picture postcards or restaurant menus. He lay down again, stubbed out the cigar in the ashtray and murmured:

‘I don’t feel sleepy yet. What kind of business is he in?’

‘Who?’

‘Your friend.’

‘He’s in the motor trade. But look, if that’s all you’ve got to say, I’d prefer it if you let me get to sleep. You seem like an odd customer to me! What time will I wake you tomorrow?’

‘Don’t wake me.’

‘All right. You don’t snore, do you?’

‘Only if I sleep on my left side.’

‘Well, try to sleep on the right, then.’

He stayed awake a long time, eyes wide open, and the funny thing was that it was his companion who began to snore regularly, while he laughed silently to himself.

What followed was a little like the day before when, in Groningen, through half-open eyes, he had watched Mrs Poppinga getting dressed without her knowledge.

It was after daybreak but still rather dark, and the curtains hadn’t been drawn back, so that more than half the room was in shadow. Just a feeble shaft of light was striking in.

And there, silhouetted against it, was Jeanne Rozier, fully dressed, holding Kees’s trousers in her hand.

She was going through his pockets, since she had seen the night before that he had put his money into his trousers. She was being so careful not to make a sound that she was pulling a strained face, and Poppinga, without meaning to, began to smile.

That smile, although it was silent, must have alerted her, since she turned towards him suddenly. Just as quickly, he closed his eyes and she wondered whether he was sleeping or just pretending.

It was amusing to feel her there, suspended in the ray of pale daylight, holding the trousers, not daring to make another move, holding her breath. For a moment, she was taken in, and her hand went into a pocket, but the next instant she cottoned on, and said in a casual voice:

‘Well, I never!’

‘What?’

‘You’ve really been having me on, haven’t you?’

‘Why?’

‘You needn’t pretend! I know the score.’

And she dropped the trousers on to a pale-yellow armchair, picked up her coat, and came to stand over the bed.

‘Can you tell me why you arrived in Paris with no luggage and a pocketful of cash? Don’t play the innocent with me! Yes, you did take me in.’

‘But—’

‘Wait!’

She went over to the window and drew the curtains, letting in the wintry sunlight.

‘Come on, out with it.’

She sat down on the edge of the bed, looked at him searchingly, and finally sighed:

‘I should have seen at once you didn’t look like a kerb-crawler. When you said you were in business last night, what did you mean? I bet it’s cocaine! Isn’t it? Come on, I dare you to deny it.’



4.

How Kees Poppinga spent Christmas Eve and how, early next morning, he chose a car that suited him

The porter at the Carlton had taken him for a madman; Jeanne Rozier, since he had shown no anger when he surprised her going through his pockets, had taken him for a cocaine dealer. And in the end, it was just as well. He had gone to such trouble, for the last forty years, to get people to take him for Kees Poppinga, and to make sure every one of his actions was exactly as it should be.

‘I feel sleepy,’ he murmured, without replying to his companion, who had moved towards the bed.

He sensed in her green eyes, flecked like a cat’s, more than curiosity. She was intrigued. It irked her to have to leave him without knowing. One knee on the bed, she murmured:

‘You don’t want me to come back in there for a while?’

‘Don’t bother!’

She was holding in her hand the banknotes she had taken from his pocket, and she placed them on the table with a deliberate movement.

‘I’m putting them here, see! Tell me! Can I just take one of these?’

He was not so drowsy that he failed to see that she had picked out a thousand-franc note, but what did it matter? He nodded off again.

Jeanne Rozier had only a couple of hundred metres to run, through the cold morning air, then three floors to climb, and she was at home, in a furnished apartment in Rue Fromentin, where she closed the door quietly, poured some milk for the cat, undressed with neat movements, and slipped into the bed, where a man was lying.

‘Move over, Louis.’

Louis shifted with a grunt.

‘I’ve just come from this really odd character. He almost frightened me.’

But Louis wasn’t listening, and after lying for a quarter of an hour with her eyes fixed on the gap in the curtains, Jeanne Rozier went off to sleep, properly this time, in her own bed, warmed by Louis, who was wearing silk pyjamas.

...

It was at almost the same time, as offices started to fill up with people who had no great desire to work, and whose first cigarette of the day tasted bitter, that the telegram arrived at Rue des Saussaies.

Amsterdam Police HQ to Paris Police HQ

Individual named Kees Poppinga, age 39, resident Groningen, wanted for murder of Pamela Makinsen, committed night of 23–24 December, suite Carlton Hotel, Amsterdam. Stop.

Reason to believe Poppinga caught train to France. Stop. Grey suit and hat. Stop. Blond hair, fair complexion, blue eyes, average build, no distinguishing features. Stop. Speaks fluent English, German and French

Smoothly and unhurriedly, the mechanism had been set in motion, that is, the description of Kees Poppinga had immediately been circulated, by wireless, telegraph and telephone, to all frontiers, gendarmeries and mobile units.

In every police station in Paris, a junior officer was deciphering from his tickertape machine:

. . . average build, no distinguishing features.

And all that time, Kees Poppinga was fast asleep in a Parisian hotel. He was still asleep at midday. At one o’clock, the chambermaid knocked at the glass partition at reception and called:

‘Number 7 not free yet?’

Nobody could remember, and the cleaner went up to look. She saw Kees’s calm features as he lay sleeping with his mouth open, and on the bedside table a bundle of banknotes, but she dared not touch them.

It was four in the afternoon, and the lamps were being lit when Jeanne Rozier called in turn at reception:

‘The man I came with last night, has he left?’

‘I think he’s still asleep.’

Jeanne Rozier, a newspaper in her hand, went upstairs, pushed open the door, and looked at Poppinga, who had still not moved, and whose face in repose had a childish expression.

‘Kees!’ she called suddenly in a soft voice.

The word penetrated through his sleep, but had to be repeated two or three times before it brought him to a waking state. Then he opened his eyes, saw the light from the lamp over the bed and Jeanne Rozier in her squirrel coat, wearing a hat.

‘Oh, are you still here?’ he murmured with indifference.

He was already preparing to turn over and carry on with his dream. She had to shake him.

‘Didn’t you hear what I said?’

He looked up at her calmly, rubbed his eyes, raised himself a little and asked her in a gentle voice, almost as childlike as his expression when sleeping:

‘What did you say?’

‘I called you Kees, Kees Poppinga!’

She pronounced the syllables distinctly, but he did not seem disturbed.

‘Do you still not understand? Look, read this!’

And she threw on to the bed a copy of the midday newspaper, then paced up and down the room two or three times.

Dancer murdered in luxury Amsterdam hotel!
Killer identified by documents left at the scene!
The work of a madman or a sadist, say police!

Jeanne Rozier was getting impatient and kept turning to look at her companion, waiting for him to react. He did not budge, but asked in a normal voice:

‘Can you pass me my jacket?’

She naively felt the pockets to check he was not looking for a weapon. But he wanted a cigar. He lit it, infuriatingly slowly, then, having plumped up his pillow to lean against it more comfortably, he began to read the article, sometimes moving his lips.

Our latest information is that Poppinga left his home in Groningen in circumstances which suggest he may be responsible for another crime. His employer, Julius de Coster, has suddenly disappeared . . .

‘Is this about you?’ Jeanne Rozier burst out, losing patience.

‘Yes, of course it’s about me!’

‘And you strangled that woman?’

‘I didn’t mean to. What I’m wondering is, how she came to *die*. In any case, there are a lot of exaggerations in this article, and some things that are completely untrue.’

Upon which, he got out of bed and headed towards the bathroom.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m going to get dressed. I need to get some lunch.’

‘It’s five o’clock!’

‘All right then, some dinner.’

‘And what do you intend to do after that?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Aren’t you afraid you’re going to be arrested any minute?’

‘Someone would have to recognize me first.’

‘And where are you going to sleep? You’re forgetting that in any hotel they’ll ask for your papers.’

‘Yes, that is rather tiresome.’

He had not yet had time to think about all that, and he had been so deeply asleep that he had to make a certain effort to think.

‘I’ll consider that by and by. Meanwhile, I don’t even have a toothbrush. Isn’t this Christmas Eve?’

‘Yes.’

‘And they don’t have Christmas trees here?’

‘What they do here is go out to celebrate. You can have supper and dance in all the restaurants and cafés. Tell me, are you still having me on?’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Are you just enjoying yourself, letting me think you are this Poppinga?’

It was happening again! People seemed determined at all costs to give him a different personality from his own.

‘Listen.’ Jeanne Rozier was speaking again. ‘I can’t make any promises . . . Perhaps I’m wrong to be taking any part in this . . . But I’m going to tell someone about you . . . No, don’t worry, not the police, but someone who might, if he feels like it, be able to help you get out of this. I don’t know if he’ll play ball, though. Sex crimes, well, people get scared . . .’

He listened to her as he laced up his black shoes.

‘I won’t be seeing him until later. Do you know Rue de Douai? No? It’s very near here. Just ask the way. There’s a tobacconist’s there, where you just need to sit down and wait. Maybe I’ll get there by midnight, but it could be later, because a whole gang of us are going out to a party.’

She looked at him one more time, and picked the newspaper up off the bed.

‘Don’t let papers like this lie around. That’s often how people get caught. And I’ll pay for the room myself, so that the office won’t take too much notice of you. They’re already surprised you’ve slept so long. That’s another sign.’

‘A sign of what?’

But she shrugged her shoulders and left.

‘See you at the tobacconist’s in Rue de Douai.’

Out on the boulevards, at about eight in the evening, when Paris was starting to come to life, he stopped in front of the sixth edition of an evening paper which had published a photograph on the front page, under the headline:

The face of Pamela’s killer!
(from Amsterdam, by Belinogram)

It was terrifying. First of all, he asked himself where this photograph could have been obtained, since he did not remember it himself. Then, by looking more closely, he saw, to the left of his head, part of someone else’s face, and he understood. The other person was his wife. And the photo was the one on the sideboard, showing the whole family.

They had enlarged his head and cropped the rest of the picture, and then, if you please, they had transmitted it by Belinogram, so that the image was blurred, as if it had been left out in the rain.

At a second newspaper stand, he stopped in front of the same newspaper, with the same photograph, and almost regretted that he was so unrecognizable. It could have been any man in the street as easily as himself!

The murderer’s wife suggests that he has had an attack of amnesia.

He went to a third newspaper kiosk, bought a copy of the paper and asked:

‘Are there any other evening papers?’

Four titles were pointed out to him and he bought them all.

‘Do you have any Dutch papers?’

‘You’ll have to go to the kiosk by the Opera.’

Lights blazed everywhere, and posters invited people to celebrate Christmas Eve for 25 or 100 francs, ‘all in’. The Parisians had not yet come out to enjoy themselves, but the time was approaching.

‘Give me the Dutch newspapers, please.’

He gave a start. Staring him in the face was the Dutch *Daily Mail*, and the same photograph as in the French papers was on the front page.

‘I’ll take the *Daily Mail* and the *Morning Post* as well.’

The more he saw of them, the more satisfied he felt, just as in the past he had been happy to watch work piling up on his desk. Should he go to the tobacconist’s in Rue de Douai now?

Better to eat first, and he took a seat in the Café de la Paix, where the waiters were fixing the last paper chains, and bunches of mistletoe.

The sight made him think that Amersen would that very morning have delivered the Christmas tree which he had ordered. What would they do with it, back home? And what would a girl like Frida be thinking?

He had never considered this kind of thing before, when he read newspaper stories, and now that he was right in the middle of one, he was realizing the multitude of little side-effects it could produce.

For instance, he had a life-insurance policy. But what happens to a life-insurance policy if its holder is wanted for murder?

‘Everything to your liking, sir?’ the head waiter asked him: he had ordered his steak rare.

‘Perfectly all right!’ he replied with conviction.

Apart from the fact that he couldn’t really read his Dutch newspapers as he ate, and found the pudding he was served less flavoursome than back in Holland. He had a sweet tooth. He also liked to drink his coffee with whipped cream and vanilla sugar, which the waiter did not seem to understand.

Someone who had really been impressed was Jeanne Rozier! How did he know that? Because she was taking an interest in him, although he had not asked her for anything. What must she be thinking? That he was an exceptionally cool character, evidently. As he thought himself. To prove this to his own satisfaction, he went up to a policeman on Boulevard des Capucines to ask the way to Rue de Douai.

There, on a corner site, was the tobacconist's shop with its counter, and behind a glass partition a small café with eight tables. Kees Poppinga seated himself in the café, finding by good luck a free table near the window. Outside, he could see the signs of nightclubs starting to light up, but the doormen and professional dancers were still chatting at the bar. Seated in the opposite corner was a flower-seller, her basket on the ground beside her, drinking coffee with a glass of rum.

'I'll have a coffee too, waiter.'

He was a little disappointed by the strange Christmas Eve that was getting under way all round him, nothing like a real Christmas Eve, merely a sort of disorderly bacchanal. By nine in the evening, there were already drunks in the street and nobody seemed to be talking about midnight mass!

From our special reporter in Groningen:

While our Amsterdam correspondents were still making inquiries at the Carlton, where the hapless Pamela met her death, we hastened to Groningen, in order to find out more about the personality of Kees Poppinga, the dancer's murderer . . .

Kees sighed, just as he did when some employee of Julius de Coster made an unpardonable mistake. He took the red notebook from his pocket, jotted down the date, the title of the newspaper, and then wrote:

Not murderer, killer. It should not be overlooked that her death was accidental, a case of manslaughter, not murder.

He glanced across at the flower-seller, who was dozing as she waited for the theatregoers to come out, and carried on reading

What was our amazement [the report continued] to learn that Kees Poppinga was a well-respected man and that this news has caused utter consternation in Groningen, where the townsfolk are lost in conjecture . . .

He underlined the word 'conjecture', with his pencil, since he found it pretentious.

At Poppinga's home, where the distress of his family is painful to witness, Mrs Poppinga was prepared to say . . .

Calmly, between two puffs at his cigar, he noted:

I see that Mama was prepared to talk to the press!

And he smiled, because the flower-seller's head had just slumped forward on to her chest.

. . . that only a sudden attack of insanity, combined with a moment of amnesia, can possibly explain such a deed . . .

He found it amusing to underline the word ‘deed’, especially if Mama had really uttered it.

Then he turned to a new page in the notebook to write:

Mrs Poppinga’s opinion: insanity or amnesia.

She would not be alone. A junior clerk at Julius’s office, a lad of seventeen, whom he had hired himself, had told the reporter confidently:

I had already noticed that at times, his eyes had this strange gleam in them.

As for Dr Claes, he opined complacently:

It is clear that the only explanation for Poppinga’s action is a sudden episode of madness. As for whether there were any previous signs of this, professional confidentiality prevents me . . .

So, everyone had decided he was mad. Until the moment when they started to think he might actually have killed Julius de Coster before killing Pamela.

Because at that point, old Copenghem had told the journalist:

It pains me to speak ill of a man who was a member of our Circle, but it can be said with certainty that to an impartial observer, Kees Poppinga has always been a bitter person, unwilling to recognize the superiority of others in any sphere, and plotting vengeance. If his inferiority complex became an obsession, that would explain the event that . . .

Poppinga wrote in his book, alongside Copenghem’s name: *inferiority complex*.

Then in small handwriting:

Only beat me once at chess and that was by surprise. So, who is he to talk!

At ten o’clock, he had failed to realize that there were no more free seats in the café, and that he was being edged all the time towards the end of his banquette. He raised his eyes from the newspapers and his notebook, saw a strange face opposite, blinked, then paid no more attention. He did the same when he noticed that the customers included four or five negroes. The flower-seller was still there. Then people in evening dress started to appear, sitting cheek by jowl with other customers in much shabbier clothes.

He was not aware that he was in one of the sidestreets of Montmartre, and that the people around him were extras and walk-on performers, as celebrations were about to begin in all the local cafés and nightclubs.

The clerk at Groningen station remembers a man who looked very agitated.

He wrote down with irritation:

Not true.

For people to talk of madness, or inferiority complexes was one thing, but to claim that because, a few hours later, he had killed Pamela (without intending to), he had been in an abnormal state on leaving Groningen . . . Was he agitated now, in spite of the two cups of coffee he had drunk?

Worst of all was the night porter at the Carlton, whose ears Poppinga would readily have boxed:

As soon as he arrived, I could tell he wasn't in a normal frame of mind and I considered warning Miss Pamela.

Kees noted:

Well, why didn't he, then?

When he came back down [the porter went on], he had the physiognomy of a hunted beast and . . .

Poppinga wrote sarcastically:

Ask him what physiognomy means!

Upon which he raised his head, since someone was standing in front of him looking him up and down. A young man in a dinner-jacket. Behind him stood Jeanne Rozier, who murmured:

'This is my friend, Louis. I'll leave you . . .'

'Come with me a moment,' said Louis, hands in pockets, cigarette in mouth. 'Leave all the stuff there, let's go downstairs.'

He took his companion to the washrooms in the basement, and there he examined him from head to toe, muttering:

'Jeanne told me the whole story. I took a look at the papers. Do you often do things like that?'

Poppinga smiled. From the way his companion was looking at him, straight in the eye, with an ironic expression, he felt sure that this one

would not start talking about madness or inferiority complexes.

‘It was the first time,’ he said, suppressing the desire to smile.

‘What about the other one, the old man?’

‘They’ve got completely the wrong end of the stick. Julius de Coster has had a financial disaster, and he’s disappeared, letting people think he was committing suicide. In fact, it was precisely because of *that* that I—’

‘Never mind, I haven’t got time for that now. Can you drive?’

‘A car? Of course.’

‘Well, if I’ve got this right from Jeanne, what you need is a safe house, while someone finds you some identity papers.’

He took the cigar out of Poppinga’s mouth to light his cigarette, and decided casually:

‘OK, we’ll see what we can do. You just go and wait upstairs. We’ve got a dinner party across the road.’

It was almost midnight. The flower-seller had disappeared as had two of the negroes. From time to time, one of the doormen from a club would come in with a taxi-driver or some other person, transact a piece of business with him, have a glass of something, and go back to his position on the pavement opposite.

Never had Poppinga experienced such a dismal Christmas Eve, and at the stroke of midnight, he waited in vain to hear the bells ring. The nearest thing was a drunk who stood up and started singing a Christmas carol of which he knew only the first couple of lines. Then the landlord decided to turn on the wireless and a few moments later the café was filled with the sound of a church organ and a choir of men and boys singing a liturgical anthem.

Kees folded up the newspapers, and ordered another coffee, since he no longer felt like drinking alcohol. He was waiting for the priest’s *Dominus vobiscum* as he turned to face the congregation.

A little woman, standing in front of him in her shabby clothes, was very pale, from the cold no doubt, since she came back inside every hour looking frozen, most likely from walking up and down on the pavement.

Cars were arriving in a continuous stream, pulling up outside the nightclubs. The three remaining negroes were having a lively argument – about what?

The strangest thing was that at this moment all over the earth, in every church . . .

Popinga imagined the world as if viewed from an aeroplane, supposing the plane could fly high and fast enough: a huge ball, white with snow, and dotted with cities and villages clustered round churches, their spires projecting like gigantic nails. And in all the churches there would be lights shining, incense burning, and the faithful would be silently contemplating the Christmas crib . . .

But that wasn't true! In the first place, in Central Europe, midnight mass would already be over, since it was one in the morning there. While in America, it was still the middle of the day. And everywhere, outside churches, negroes would be arguing, streetwalkers would be warming themselves with a coffee laced with rum after walking the pavements, while hotel doormen . . .

So after that he gave up on the Christmas spirit. He had no wish to hum along to the church music, and in any case the café proprietor, who had no doubt thought the customers would like it, or who perhaps had once been a choirboy, was obliged to turn it off, as people couldn't hear themselves speak and were starting to grumble.

At once, the voices of the drinkers became audible. Smoke from cigarettes formed a blue layer two metres below the white ceiling, while opposite Popinga, a young man in a tight dinner-jacket, sitting alone in front of a glass of mineral water, was sniffing up some white powder.

Why had that other young man asked him if he could drive a car? And what would all these people around him have said if he had suddenly stood up and declared:

'I'm Kees Popinga, the Amsterdam sex maniac!'

Since one of the French newspapers had so described him.

At two in the morning he was still there, in the same place, and the waiter, who was getting to know him, nodded in a friendly way whenever he went past. He didn't know what to drink next. So he imitated the young man opposite and ordered some mineral water. Then, as everyone else stood up, he was the only one to remain seated.

A quarrel had broken out at the bar. Voices were heard shouting. Someone was brandishing a soda siphon, which smashed on a table, and next moment a close-packed knot of people burst out on to the pavement, where a confused gathering could be seen.

A whistle was blown somewhere. Popinga, without showing concern, picked up his newspapers, went down to the washroom and locked himself

inside a stall, where he set about reading mechanically an article about Dutch expansion in the eighteenth century.

When he came back upstairs, a quarter of an hour later, everything was calm again and there were no pieces of the siphon to be seen on the floor. Some customers had left. The waiter approached him conspiratorially and winked, having noticed his client's prudent disappearance.

'Did they arrest many people?' Poppinga asked.

'Oh, you know, Christmas Eve, they're going to be lenient. They took a couple of people off to the station, but they'll let them go in the morning . . .'

Bringing a whiff of perfume with her, Jeanne Rozier now entered the café, wearing an evening dress, her skin looking moist and warm, like someone who has just been dancing energetically. She had come on a quick neighbourly visit, having thrown a coat over her bare shoulders.

'You're all right, aren't you? Someone said there was a scuffle.'

'Nothing to worry about.'

'I think Louis is going to take care of you. He hasn't made his mind up yet, but that's the way he is. Only, mind you don't leave here until I come back. If you knew how stuffy it is over there! Hardly room to pick up your fork.'

She seemed to be taking him under her wing, yet at the same time she was still eyeing him warily, as if she found him disturbing.

'Not getting too bored, are you?'

'No, not at all.'

She had left the café before he noticed that now she was addressing him more respectfully and not calling him 'sonny boy', which pleased him. This woman had understood. She wasn't a birdbrain like Pamela, who could do nothing but laugh in a silly way.

He took his notebook from his pocket. He wrote on the page where he had jotted down the opinions of Mama, the railway clerk, Copenghem, the porter at the Carlton and others:

Jeanne Rozier certainly doesn't consider me a madman!

Another woman, like the one who had come into the café several times, now asked him if he would buy her a drink, and he handed her five francs, indicating that she would get nothing more from him.

He had carefully folded up the newspapers. He was waiting. Twice, he thought of Frida's strange eyes, and wondered what she would do in life.

He was feeling hot in this café, but his head had never seemed so cool, his mind so clear. Would his wife carry out her plan of becoming a housekeeper in a hotel in the Dutch East Indies?

The idea occurred to him to send to the *Morning Post*, for the benefit of Julius de Coster, a little announcement saying simply 'How are you?'

He could do anything he pleased! He could be anyone he wished, now that he had given up trying so hard, for everyone else's benefit, to be Kees Poppinga, authorized signatory in a shipping firm.

How strange to have taken all that incredible trouble to perfect his character, so that even to the shrewdest gaze, no detail gave anything away. Which hadn't prevented Copenghem saying to the press . . .

He could, if he felt like it, just order an entire bottle of gin or cognac. He could have gone off with the woman he had given five francs to. He could have asked the nervous young man for some cocaine. He could have . . .

'A mineral water, please, waiter.'

This was by way of registering a protest against what he *could* have done. And also because he was feeling good just now, very good, with a clarity of thought that was intoxicating. He was even certain that he would be able to make Jeanne Rozier fall in love with him, in spite of her pimp.

She it was who eventually came back, by now a little tipsy, at four in the morning. She seemed surprised to find him still there, and said with warmth:

'Well, you're very faithful, aren't you?'

Then in a different voice:

'Louis and the others are suspicious. I've done what I can. This is all I managed to get out of them. In a few minutes, they'll leave the club and will take two cars. Then they'll head straight off for Porte d'Italie. Do you know where it is?'

'No.'

'Never mind. In that case, you probably won't succeed. They want you to take a car too. At Porte d'Italie they'll wait a bit, and as soon as you arrive, you should flash your lights. And then you just follow them.'

'Wait. Is Porte d'Italie left or right when I go out of here?'

'Neither, you have to go straight across the whole of Paris.'

'Never mind, I'll ask a policeman.'

‘Are you mad, or perhaps you didn’t understand? You’re supposed to *take* a car, one of the cars belonging to people dining in a nightclub.’

‘I get it. But that’s just what one *should* do, ask a policeman, then they won’t suspect you of anything.’

‘Well, try it then! I warn you that Louis and his pals won’t wait very long. And mind, don’t pick a fancy car. Just an ordinary make.’

She had sat down beside him, and for a second he regretted not having taken advantage of her presence before, when he had had the leisure. How had he failed to notice that she was really worth it?

‘When will I see you again,’ he asked in a low voice.

‘I don’t know. It depends on Louis. Look out! Here they come.’

He paid for his drinks, pulled on his overcoat, and rolled up the papers to put them in his pocket. Two cars left at almost the same moment from the impressive queue which was parked all along the street.

‘Aren’t you going to say goodbye?’

‘Yes. I really like you. You’re a good woman.’

And once out on the street, feeling that she was watching him through the window, he walked along the pavement like a man whose only thought is to go home, glanced at two or three cars, got into the fourth, and pressed the starter.

The car came to life at once, and moved away from the kerb, following for a moment in the wake of a long limousine in which there were several women, and when Poppinga turned round to wave goodbye to Jeanne Rozier, the tobacconist’s on Rue de Douai where he had celebrated Christmas Eve was no longer in sight.



5.

In which Poppinga is disappointed to find a Kees Poppinga wearing a workman's pullover and dungarees and moping about in a service station, and in which he once again demonstrates his independence

It was barely ten in the morning. The concierge was only just up, and the mail was still piled in a corner of her lodge, alongside an unopened milk bottle and a loaf of fancy bread. The streets were empty, with that heartbreaking emptiness of mornings after festivities: even the taxis were not at their rank, and the only passers-by were a few of the faithful on the way to Christmas Day mass, their noses red with cold.

'What is it?' mumbled Jeanne Rozier huskily, when after a few minutes she began to register a noise but without connecting it to the door of her apartment.

'Police!'

At this word, she was at once wide awake, and feeling with her toes for her slippers, she muttered:

'Wait a minute . . .'

She was at home in Rue Fromentin. She had slept alone and her green silk dress was tossed across a chair, her stockings at the foot of the bed. She still had on the slip she was wearing the day before and threw a peignoir over it before opening the door.

'What do you want?'

She knew this inspector vaguely by sight. He came into her bedroom, removed his hat, turned on the light and simply declared:

'Chief Inspector Lucas wants to see you. My orders are to take you to Quai des Orfèvres.'

'Works on public holidays now, does he?'

Perhaps Jeanne Rozier was more beautiful as she was now, just out of bed, than fully dressed. Her auburn hair fell in tousled locks round her face, and her eyes without makeup expressed a kind of animal distrust.

She had begun to put her clothes on, without troubling herself about the inspector, who was smoking a cigarette, and did not take his eyes off her.

‘What’s it like outside?’ she asked.

‘Freezing hard.’

She put on a minimum of makeup. Once in the street, she asked:

‘You haven’t come in a taxi?’

‘No, I didn’t have authority to do that.’

‘In that case, I’ll pay. I don’t want to go halfway across Paris on a bus!’

When they arrived at police headquarters in Quai des Orfèvres, where the corridors and most of the offices were empty, she had, without letting her thoughts show, envisaged all the imaginable hypotheses, and was ready with a reply for any questions the chief inspector might ask her.

He let her wait a good fifteen minutes on principle, but Jeanne Rozier was too used to the procedure to show the least impatience.

‘Come in, my dear. My apologies for getting you out of bed so early.’

She sat down next to the mahogany desk, put her handbag on it and looked at Chief Inspector Lucas, who was bald and avuncular.

‘We haven’t seen you here for some time, have we? Let me see, the last time, if I remember correctly was three years ago, something to do with drugs. So? You’re no longer with Louis?’

The first two sentences had been amiable in tone, in order to create an atmosphere, but Jeanne gave a shudder at the last, replying, nevertheless:

‘Now who told you that?’

‘I don’t quite recall. Last night, I was out for the evening in Montmartre and someone told me you’d taken up with a foreigner, a German or an Englishman?’

‘Really!’

‘That’s why I asked you to come. I wouldn’t want you to get into any trouble.’

To listen to them, one would think they were old friends. The inspector was pacing up and down, his fingers tucked under his waistcoat. He had offered a cigarette to his visitor and she was smoking it, sitting with her legs elegantly crossed, gazing out at the deserted embankment of the Seine, and the end of a bridge where buses were crossing.

‘I think I know what you mean,’ she murmured after a moment’s thought. ‘I’m sure you’re talking about one of my clients from the day before yesterday.’

And Lucas feigned astonishment:

‘Ah, a client. I was told—’

‘They couldn’t have told you anything different. If someone said anything at all, it would be Freddy the maître d’ at Picratt’s. They were just about to close when this Dutchman came in, determined to have a good time. He invited me to his table and ordered champagne. When the bill came, he had to change some florins. We went to Rue Victor-Massé, the place I always go, because it’s clean. We went to bed. And he never even touched me.’

‘Why not?’

‘Search me. In the morning I’d had enough of sleeping alongside this big fat man full of soup, so I left.’

‘With his money?’

‘No, I woke him up and he gave me a thousand francs.’

‘For doing nothing?’

‘Well, that wasn’t my fault, was it?’

‘And you went home. Where you found Louis?’

She nodded.

‘What’s he doing these days, your Louis? Apparently he wasn’t there this morning.’

At this Jeanne Rozier’s eyes blazed.

‘Yes, and if you can tell me where he is, I’d very much like to know!’ she said angrily.

‘You didn’t spend last night together, then?’

‘But we did! We’d had a nice party, just with a few friends. And some little minx must have made eyes at him. All I know is he disappeared, and he didn’t sleep at home.’

‘Working a lot, is he?’

She laughed cynically.

‘Why would he be working? Would he need me if he was working?’

Lucas smiled.

Jeanne Rozier sighed, to indicate that she was wondering if that was all. Both of them had played a role to perfection and both were still harbouring suspicions and secret thoughts.

‘Can I go back to bed now?’

‘Yes, of course. But tell me, if you were to come across that Dutchman again—’

‘First thing I’d do, I’d slap his face,’ she declared. ‘I can’t stand perverts. If you think I don’t know why you’ve been asking me all these questions for a quarter of an hour! I read the papers too, you know! When I think I might have ended up like that dancer in Amsterdam . . .’

‘So you recognized him from the photograph?’

‘Well, I’d be lying if I said I did, because he doesn’t look much like the photo. But I guessed, all the same.’

‘And he didn’t tell you anything? Or give you any idea what he was going to do next?’

‘He asked me if I knew the south of France. I think he might have mentioned Nice.’

She was standing up now. The chief inspector thanked her, and a quarter of an hour later Jeanne Rozier was on her way home, where instead of going back to bed she took a hot bath, then dressed soberly.

It was about half past midday when she went into Chez Mélie, a restaurant frequented by regulars, where she sat down at a table and ordered a glass of port, since she wasn’t hungry.

‘Louis?’ the waiter asked her, as if that one word was worth a whole sentence.

‘Don’t know. I suppose he’ll be along.’

At three o’clock, he had still not arrived. Jeanne Rozier left a message for him and went to a local cinema, where it was five o’clock before a man came to sit next to her. It was Louis.

‘You’re late,’ she whispered.

‘I had to go to Poitiers.’

‘Well, well! We need to talk. Careful, there might be someone eavesdropping behind us.’

They left the cinema and went into a crowded café on Place Blanche.

‘They hauled me down to Quai des Orfèvres this morning. Lucas, it was. The one who always pretends he’s treating you like his own daughter, but he’s more of a bastard than all the rest put together. Where did you leave our package?’

‘At Goin’s place. He’s an odd fish, the Dutchman. Fernand, who was in the first car with me, said he’d never make it to Place d’Italie with a car.

But he did. We'd hardly got there ourselves when we saw this car flashing at us. We headed off to Juvisy at top speed. Then we went inside the garage and he followed us, as if he'd been doing it all his life.'

'What did he say?'

'Nothing! Goin was waiting with his mechanic. We all set to work, and we were finished in an hour. Rose made us some coffee. We were away again before first light, in three cars, heading in different directions, except for your Dutchman, who'll have to stay at Goin's until I can see how to get him out of there. He must have some money stashed away.'

'You need to be careful. The police already knew I'd spent a night with him. If Lucas called me in on a day like today at ten in the morning, it's because he suspects something.'

'That's a bit of bad luck,' Louis grumbled. 'I'll have to phone Goin and tell him.'

'What if they listen in on you?'

Seeing them sitting at their table, anyone would have simply taken them for a young and elegant couple. Their faces gave nothing away about their feelings.

'We'll find something else,' said Jeanne Rozier finally, ending the conversation. 'I'll talk to you tomorrow. Tonight you'd better go somewhere you'll be visible, a boxing match, the cycle track, that kind of thing.'

'OK. What about dinner?'

'No, I told them you'd been cheating on me with some girl. You'd best find one to take along.'

As she said this, while looking round, she pinched his thigh and added: 'But keep your hands off her. Or else!'

...

Why should Kees have been astonished, since he had heard the confessions of Julius de Coster in the Petit Saint-Georges and had decided there and then that everything he had ever believed in did not exist?

In the past, he would not have noticed that this was a service station like no other. Now, on the contrary, he realized that a bona fide one would not be located a hundred metres off the highway, on a road leading nowhere, with two unlit petrol pumps and doors that swung open automatically at a certain signal from a car horn.

He had also noted that on a piece of waste ground alongside, there were at least a dozen cars in pieces, not old bangers but quite new-looking vehicles which had been in accidents; one of them indeed was partly burned out. He had had time to read by the light from the car's headlamps the sign 'Goin & Boret. Specialists in electrical auto accessories'.

And then he had watched, smoking a cigar, the scene that had followed their arrival. Two men were waiting for them, one who was large and heavily built, and must be Goin, and a boy who probably wasn't Boret and whom everyone called Kiki. Goin was in brown dungarees with spanners in every pocket. He shook hands only briefly with Louis before getting to work.

It seemed that they were all used to this. The second car was driven by an amiable young man, whose name Kees did not hear, and who was wearing a dinner-jacket, like Louis and Fernand.

Apart from a van and some tools, the garage was empty: its floor was made of beaten earth and the walls whitewashed. In one corner stood a huge stove and two powerful electric lamps shedding bright beams.

While the others were working, Louis took a suitcase out of the van, stripped off his outer clothes and calmly, like an actor changing his costume behind the scenes, put on a brown suit, knotted a yellow tie, and then put dungarees on top of everything, so as to give a hand to his companions.

Fernand and the young man did the same, while Goin was manipulating a blowtorch and Kiki was unscrewing the number plates of the cars.

'Rose not here?' asked Louis.

'She'll be down soon. I rang the bell when I heard you coming.'

And Kees noticed a bell-push near an inner door which must lead to accommodation. And indeed, a few minutes later a woman appeared: still quite young, obviously just woken from sleep and having dressed quickly, she came into the garage, greeted everyone as a friend, including Poppinga, whom she looked at, however, in surprise.

'Just three this time! Slim pickings, eh? That's Christmas for you.'

'Get us some coffee quickly, you! Want anything to eat, Louis?'

'No thanks! I'm still full of turkey.'

No one seemed concerned about anything that might be happening outside. They felt completely safe. Between two turns of a spanner, they exchanged news and jokes.

'Jeanne OK, is she?'

‘It was her found our friend here, and you’re going to keep him with you till further notice. But look out, he’s in deep trouble, and if he’s caught . . .’

In an hour, the number plates had been changed, as had the serial numbers on the engines and chassis. There was a kitchen behind the garage, a surprisingly clean one, where Rose served them coffee, bread, butter and salami.

‘Now you,’ said Louis to Kees, in between short sips of his scalding hot coffee, ‘you’re going to lodge here, and you do whatever Goin says. Until you’ve got some new papers, no monkeying about. Next week, we’ll try to get you away somewhere. Understood?’

‘I understand perfectly,’ said Poppinga with satisfaction.

‘On our way, then, boys! Fernand’s going to head for Reims. You, go round the outside of Paris, and try to flog the car in Rouen. I’m off to Orléans. See you tonight, kids. See you later, my beautiful Rose!’

At first Kees found it amusing to be in this completely new atmosphere with people he did not know. Once the work was finished on the cars, Goin, who stood one metre eighty, and was more strongly built than the captain of the *Ocean III*, was sipping his coffee, while rolling a cigarette, as Rose looked dreamily around, elbows on the table.

‘You’re foreign?’

‘Dutch.’

‘Well, if you don’t want to be found out, better say you’re English, there are more of them round here. You speak English, do you? Cops got your description?’

While Kees helped himself to more coffee with plenty of milk, Goin went upstairs and came back down with a pair of old blue trousers and overalls like his own, plus a heavy grey woollen pullover.

‘Here, try these. They should fit you. Rose’ll make you up a bed in the box room off our bedroom. If I’ve got this right, you’d better spend a lot of time asleep for now.’

Rose went up in turn, to prepare his bed, no doubt. Goin, who was sleepy, half-closed his eyes and sat still, legs stretched out in front of him, until they heard a voice call down:

‘You can come up now!’

‘Hear that? Go to bed. Good night.’

The staircase was dark and narrow. Kees had to go through Goin and Rose’s bedroom, which was untidy, and found himself in a smaller room,

furnished with a camp bed, a table and a cracked mirror on the wall.

‘There’s a wash-basin on the landing. I hope noise doesn’t bother you. Because night and day you’ll hear the trains whistling. We’re near the goods yard.’

She closed the door. He went to look out of the dormer window, and by peering through the half-light, saw railway tracks stretching out into the distance, carriages, whole trains, and ten locomotives at least, belching out pure white plumes of steam against the muddy sky.

He smiled, stretched, sat on his bed, and a quarter of an hour later he was fast asleep, fully dressed.

He was still asleep when Jeanne Rozier was summoned to police headquarters. He was even asleep when she went into Chez Mélie, and when at two o’clock Rose peered in at the door, astonished at his long silence.

He rose only at three, pulled on the new clothes, which made him look stockier, felt his way down the unlit stairs, and found a place laid for him at one end of the kitchen table.

‘Rabbit stew all right for you?’

‘Certainly!’

He liked anything edible.

‘Where’s your husband gone?’

‘He’s not my husband, he’s my brother. Gone to a football match fifteen kilometres away.’

‘The others aren’t back?’

‘No, they never come back.’

‘And Jeanne Rozier? Does she come sometimes?’

‘Why would she come here? She’s the boss’s woman.’

He would have liked to see Jeanne again, without quite knowing why. It irked him to be cut off from her like this, and he went on thinking about that as he ate his rabbit stew, dipping his bread crusts in the thick gravy.

‘Can I go for a walk?’

‘Charlie didn’t tell me.’

‘Who’s Charlie?’

‘My brother, of course. Call him Goin if you prefer.’

A strange woman, this was, who acted more like a servant than anything else. Her complexion was pale, almost otherworldly, she had far too much

lipstick on and was wearing an unbecoming orange silk dress and very high heels.

‘And you stay here in the garage all afternoon?’

‘Somebody has to. Tonight I’m going dancing.’

He preferred to go out. He found himself walking through the streets of Juvisy, where since it was Christmas Day the only people out were in their Sunday best. Wearing the pullover and Goin’s old trousers, he strolled about, hands in pockets, and thought of buying a pipe. They only had very ordinary models, but he bought one, packed it with shag tobacco, then went into a café where some customers were playing bar billiards.

It was there that he discovered a complicated slot machine, where you put in a franc to set spinning a combination of wheels with pictures of different fruits, which might win you two, four, eight or sixteen francs, or the jackpot.

‘Can you give me fifty one-franc coins?’ he asked.

Half an hour later, he asked for another fifty, since he was now addicted to the fruit machine. People were staring at him. They came over to watch him play. He had taken his little red notebook out of his pocket and was writing down all his results.

At five o’clock, when the air was blue with smoke, he was still playing, without paying attention to his surroundings, since he was beginning to understand.

‘I see how it works,’ he told the café proprietor. ‘One coin in every two falls into a special slot which is the owner’s profit.’

‘I wouldn’t know about that. It doesn’t belong to us. These people came and fixed it here and they come to collect the takings.’

‘How often?’

‘Once a week, near enough. It depends.’

‘And how much do they collect?’

‘That I don’t know.’

The regulars winked at each other as they watched him doing complicated calculations and playing with a look of bland concentration. When eight or twelve francs fell out, he picked them up without expression, wrote down a number and carried on.

The customers were mostly railwaymen, and without stopping his game Kees asked one of them:

‘Is this a big station?’

‘This is the most important marshalling yard for Paris. You know, if you go on playing, you’ll lose all you put in . . .’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘And you’re still playing?’

He had had to put down his pipe, because it got in the way. He bought some cigars. He drank an aperitif with a name he didn’t recognize, but which he saw most of the other customers drinking. And he liked its colour.

A funny kind of Christmas Day this was! Nobody seemed to have any concern for religious services, and he could hear no church bells ringing. At one table, people were playing cards. A whole family was sitting there, father, mother, two children. The father and his friends were playing while the three others looked on, the children taking sips from his glass from time to time.

Popinga had finished doing his sums.

With an air of importance, he approached the bar and declared to the owner:

‘Do you know how much a machine like that brings in? At least a hundred francs a day. And supposing that it cost five thousand francs . . .’

‘But what if someone gets the jackpot?’ a voice objected.

‘That doesn’t matter, I’ll explain how it works . . .’

Two pages of his notebook were covered with equations. They listened to him without understanding. When he left, someone asked:

‘Who is he?’

‘No idea. Sounded like a foreigner.’

‘Where does he work?’

‘Don’t know that either. He lost two hundred francs in the fruit machine. Oddball, eh?’

‘Did he strike you as a bit crazy?’

And a railwayman concluded:

‘Foreigners, they’re all the same. That’s why we don’t understand them.’

Goin returned from the football match, and Rose went out dancing. They closed the garage. Goin, in his bedroom slippers, opened a newspaper in the kitchen, rolled himself a cigarette and looked the most serene and contented of men, while Kees made a few notes in his book.

Profit on three cars: at least thirty thousand francs. If that’s repeated every week, which would be quite easy, it would work out for the year at . . .

Then underneath:

Would like to see Jeanne Rozier and find out why she made me come here.

Upon which, he went to bed and slept, but not before looking out for a while at the railway tracks in the night, the red and green lights, and the dark trains going by. But it was of Jeanne Rozier that he was thinking all the time, and curiously he recalled with pleasure the moments of intimacy which at the time had left him indifferent.

Next day, he got up at ten and saw a thin layer of snow, not on the road, where it had melted, but on the hedges and the railway tracks. He found Rose, still in her night clothes, in the kitchen and asked where her brother was.

‘Gone to Paris.’

In the garage, there was no one but Kiki, who was repairing a battery, sticking his tongue out like a conscientious schoolboy.

‘I’d like to go to Paris too,’ Kees said to Rose.

‘My brother said not to let you. Seemingly you’ll see why when you read the morning paper.’

‘What does he mean by that?’

‘Dunno, I haven’t seen it.’

Evidently she was without curiosity. She was busy frying onions in a pan and did not turn round when he opened the paper.

In a case as delicate as this, our readers will understand that we have to observe the greatest discretion. Nevertheless we can report that Christmas was not a holiday for everyone, and that Chief Inspector Lucas of the Police Judiciaire has been hard at work. The arrest of the Amsterdam sex maniac is expected any minute . . .

Still that way of describing him! He underlined with scorn the words ‘sex maniac’, and looked across with a strange smile at Rose’s back and her broad hips, which the folds of the kimono made even wider.

We have also learned from Holland that the case has taken an unexpected turn, given that the firm of Julius de Coster en Zoon has been placed in the hands of the receivers. Was it when he discovered the loss of all his savings, which he had placed in the firm he worked for, that Kees Poppinga decided to visit vengeance on his employer? Should we seek any other explanation . . .?

From all this, he retained three words above all: Chief Inspector Lucas. Then he went over to lift the lid of the saucepan. After that, until midday, he went to play the fruit machine, in the deserted café, chatting to the owner.

When he returned to the garage, Goin had come back for lunch – a Goin he hardly recognized, since he was wearing an elegant tailored suit.

‘There you are!’ he exclaimed bad-temperedly. ‘Are you out of your mind? Where’ve you been?’

‘Just to this nice little café.’

‘You don’t know what’s going on? I saw the boss this morning. Yesterday, a police inspector came and hauled Jeanne Rozier out of bed, and took her down to headquarters. If we don’t get in deep trouble over you, we’ll be lucky.’

‘What did she say?’

‘Who?’

‘Jeanne Rozier’

‘How would I know? But anyway, the boss says you’re not to stir from your room. Rose will bring you your meals. You’ve got to stay out of sight for a few days until Louis contacts you.’

‘Don’t you want anything to eat?’ Rose asked with indifference.

‘I was waiting for you to serve me.’

‘When he brought you here, I didn’t know how serious it was. For crying out loud. What got into you? Are you up the pole or what?’

‘I don’t understand what you mean.’

‘Do you go around strangling women?’

‘It was the first time. If she hadn’t laughed . . .’

And he began to eat his beef stew and fried potatoes.

‘Well, I’ll tell you this for a start, lay a finger on my sister and I’ll smash your face in. If I’d known what kind of a pervert you were . . .’

Kees decided it was not worth replying to this. The other man would not have understood, and it was better to eat his meal without a word.

‘So you can just go back to your room and stay there. Bad enough that you’ve been cavorting about in the Juvisy cafés. You didn’t speak to anyone, I hope.’

‘Yes, I did.’

The funny thing was it was Goin who was getting worked up, while Kees calmly ate his food with appetite.

‘We’ll soon see if the boss has made a very big mistake. And to think I took you for someone interesting.’

A real quarrel. With Rose eating at one corner of the table, keeping an eye on the cooking stove like a good housewife, and Kiki, who had his

lunch sitting on the doorstep with a plate on his knee.

Popinga kept his thoughts to himself. He seemed to be listening to all this, so Goin carried on.

‘In three days at most, the boss’ll be here again. He’s got to go to Marseille tonight, but once he’s back . . .’

Popinga had already decided on his course of action. He finished his plateful, wiped his mouth with his handkerchief and announced:

‘I’m going up to my room. Good evening.’

No one replied, and they watched as he started up the stairs, but he hadn’t reached the landing when he heard Goin call, as if regretting his harsh words:

‘If you need anything, just stamp your foot three times on the floor. The kitchen’s underneath and Rose will hear you.’

Kees had no desire to sleep. He went over to the dormer window, and let his gaze wander over the extraordinary landscape, with snow-covered fields in the distance, railway tracks, buildings, iron girders, all the confusing clutter of a huge goods yard, carriages without engines shunting along, huge locomotives marking time furiously with whistles and screeches, and a few trees which had escaped destruction making a desolate black tangle of branches against the cold sky.

From everything that had been said, Kees retained one thing: Louis was leaving for Marseille.

At about four o’clock, sitting on the bed, he re-read the paper by the light of the unshaded electric bulb:

The inspector interviewed a certain Jeanne R—, 13, Rue Fromentin, who . . .

It was cold. Kees had wrapped himself in the cotton coverlet. He had pulled his bed over towards the metal pipe running up from the kitchen stove through his room and into the roof. The trains went on whistling threateningly. The sounds from outside made an orchestral clamour with deep growls and high-pitched screams, the puffing of the locomotives, and occasionally the sound of a car passing rapidly on the main road.

Louis was off to Marseille. And this Rose woman, with her pale face, hadn’t even read the paper to find out who he was. And Louis must now be cursing him. Unless, that is, he’d already planned to turn him in.

Well, that didn’t matter, did it? He could shrug his shoulders, and contemplate with scorn the bulky pullover and dungarees which had

momentarily transformed the real Poppinga.

He was cleverer than all of them, including Louis, including Jeanne Rozier. Their whole gang was shackled to this garage, the same way Mama was shackled to her household, Claes to his patients and Éléonore, and Copenghem shackled to the chess club, where he had ambitions to become the chairman . . .

He, Poppinga, was shackled to nothing, to nobody, to no idea, to absolutely nothing at all, as was proved by . . .



6.

The indiscretions of the stovepipe and the second attack carried out by Kees Poppinga

He might perhaps have nodded off in the warmth coming from the stovepipe, almost feeling the flames, if he had not clearly heard a door open into the kitchen, steps approaching the stove, and then a huge din that drowned out any other noise, as coal was shovelled into it. The racket had scarcely finished before he heard Goin asking:

‘Did you listen outside his door? What’s he up to?’

And Rose replying, sulkily:

‘No idea. Can’t even hear him walking about.’

‘Can you make me a cup of coffee?’

‘All right. What are you doing?’

‘As you can see, I’m trying to fix this alarm-clock that’s bust.’

Kees smiled. He could just imagine the two of them: Goin in his slippers, an extinguished cigarette in the corner of his mouth, frowning as he tried to take apart the alarm-clock on the kitchen table, while his sister, by the sound of it, was washing the dishes.

‘So what do you think of this character upstairs?’

Their voices reached him, but faintly, since they were speaking only in a desultory way, without any emotion, just chatting, leaving long silences between their utterances. Sometimes a train loudly interrupted the conversation, so that only scraps of it could be heard.

Kees, eyes closed, listened to it all, enjoying the heat from the stovepipe.

‘I think he’s an odd kind of bird. I wouldn’t trust him. What’s his job?’

‘I only found out about him today. He strangled a girl, a dancer in Amsterdam, and maybe, before that, he’d bumped off some old geezer.’

Kees Poppinga, despite his drowsiness, could not help reaching out for his notebook to write down the words: 'bumped off'.

Downstairs, the water was boiling and Rose was grinding coffee beans, putting a cup and the sugar bowl on the table.

'If only I could work out where this wheel goes . . .'

'You saw Louis, then?'

'Yes. I wanted to know what we should do with our friend upstairs.'

'And what did he say?'

'You know how he is. He wants people to think he's got a reason for everything and there's a plan. But what *I*'ve always thought is he just muddles along. He tried to persuade me he's got something on this Dutchman, so he can make him shell out as much he wants. But at the same time, as I pointed out to him, the Dutchman's got something on us . . .'

'Drink your coffee while it's hot. There's a screw on the floor.'

'And if you talk back like that to Louis, he gets angry and starts yelling that he has to carry all the responsibility, and we should leave everything to him. All right, I said, fine as far as the cars go. But I certainly don't like having someone like this Dutchman living in our place. What if he's a maniac, and he tries to attack you . . .?'

'He don't frighten me.'

'Not to mention we could be looking at five years for this. What I think is, it was Jeanne got Louis saddled with this character. And Louis didn't dare say no, so he said yes, without looking further than his nose. Right, finished. Let's see if it works.'

The sound came so clearly that you could almost see Goin winding up the clock.

'Fixed it, have you?'

But the only reply was a crash, as Goin had flung the clock in a rage across the kitchen.

'Never mind, you can buy another one for me tomorrow. Have they brought the paper?'

'No, not yet.'

'I gave Louis a piece of advice. What I said was, look, you get a chance like this, why not use it to get a bit of quid pro quo? We turn this sex maniac in to the police, well obviously they're not going to be too fussy, are they, poking their noses into our business?'

'And what did he say?'

‘Nothing. He’ll see when he gets back from Marseille.’

‘Do they have the guillotine in Holland?’

‘Dunno. Why do you ask?’

‘No reason.’

Silence. Then Goin said, rather awkwardly:

‘If he was normal, like us, I wouldn’t be going on like this. But you know what I mean. You’ve seen yourself, the way he acts. I’m going out for the paper.’

Kees Poppinga had not budged an inch. Through the window he could see a few lights in the sky and now he heard below him Rose coming and going, shuffling in her felt slippers, opening cupboards, putting away pots and pans, then with a sudden noise stoking up the stove.

It was a long wait. For Goin, the paper was merely a pretext to go to the bar and no doubt to have a game of belote, since he did not return till two hours later, when the table was already laid for supper.

‘Nobody’s been?’

‘No.’

‘And him upstairs?’

‘Must be asleep, I haven’t heard him walking about.’

‘Know what I thought on the way back? That these loners, like him, they’re more of a menace to society than we are. There was this one time Louis used his gun, on Boulevard Rochechouart, because he was cornered. At least, something like that happens, you know where you are. But this bird! Can *you* work out what he’s thinking?’

‘Nothing good,’ sighed Rose.

‘Well, what do you expect? I’ll tell you again, and I’ve said it before, I don’t like having this character in the house . . . What, rabbit again? Have you bought a job lot or something?’

‘It’s yesterday’s leftovers.’

‘Better take some up to him.’

‘I’ll take it up in a bit.’

And indeed, a little later Rose knocked at the bedroom door.

‘Open up,’ she said, ‘here’s your supper.’

Poppinga had stood up. Once the door was open, and Rose was encumbered with the tray she was carrying, he had deliberately placed himself between her and the door and was looking at her with his shifty little eyes.

‘You’re nice though, you are,’ he said.

Perhaps he did not yet know whether he merely wanted to frighten her, or whether it was worse than that.

‘You’re going to stay up here with me for a bit, aren’t you?’

She turned round without showing the least sign of emotion, and stared him up and down.

‘Well, look at *you!*’ she said in a vulgar voice.

And her eyes rested on those of the man before her, on his fixed smile and his trembling hands.

‘Don’t go thinking *I’m* a dancer! You’d better just eat your food and get to bed.’

And without making any fuss, she managed by sheer force of attitude to go past him. She stopped in the doorway and looked back:

‘And when you’ve finished, put the tray on the floor outside the door.’

The next moment, Poppinga had his ear almost pressed to the stovepipe and he soon heard the glazed door into the kitchen open and close. A chair scraped, Rose was sitting down. Silence, the chink of a glass against a bottle.

‘Was he asleep?’

‘Had been, I think.’

‘What did he say?’

‘What could he say?’

‘I thought I heard voices.’

‘I told him to eat his food and leave the tray outside.’

‘Don’t you think I’m right, and Louis’s taking a big risk? If Lucas got Jeanne down to headquarters, he must suspect something. They must be watching Jeanne . . . and Louis too, come to that. I’m wondering now if the police found out I met him today. What if they followed me?’

‘Do you want to turn him in?’

‘Well, if it wasn’t for Louis . . .’

He must have gone back to reading the paper, since there was a long silence with no voices. Finally he sighed:

‘Let’s go to bed. Nothing’s going to happen tonight. I’ll go and close up the garage.’

Poppinga had done as Rose asked and put the tray outside the door, which he then carefully closed. Next, he removed the clothes Goin had given him

and put on his grey suit, into the pockets of which he slipped what was left of his money and the red leather notebook.

He showed no impatience. Stretched out on the bed with the coverlet over him, he waited, while the brother and sister quietly undressed, exchanged a few words, moved a few objects around, then settled down for the night, having been accustomed since their childhood in some poor country village to sleep five or six in the same room.

‘ . . . G’night, Rose!’

‘ . . . G’night!’

‘I’m not a fortune teller. I know you don’t agree with me. But you’ll see, I’m right!’

‘We’ll see, won’t we?’ she replied, resignedly, or perhaps already dropping off to sleep.

Popinga waited for a quarter of an hour, half an hour, got up silently, and went over to the window. It was snowing. For a moment, he feared that opening the window would let in all the noise from the goods yard and wake the brother and sister. But he knew it would be very brief. Just under his window was an old truck, its tarpaulin than two metres from the window-sill. He hung by his hands, then let himself drop, and next moment he was on a patch of waste ground behind the garage, where his footsteps marked the thin layer of snow.

Wanting to know the time, he realized that he no longer had his watch, Goin must have taken it. After looking round to get his bearings, he headed for Juvisy: as he passed the café where he had played the fruit machine, he almost went inside, to show them how he normally looked, in his grey suit and overcoat, with a starched collar and a tie.

He saw the time on the station clock: 10.40. He walked into the booking office and politely asked the clerk when the next train would leave for Paris.

‘Twelve minutes,’ he was told.

Standing on the platform, he felt an immense sensation of relief. Not that he had had a moment’s fear in the garage. Fear was something he had not experienced since leaving Groningen.

But it seemed to him that by coming to Juvisy, he had suddenly forfeited all the benefit of his escape.

It was as if he had been somehow held in custody, as if his wife and Julius de Coster had been replaced by Louis, Goin and his sister Rose.

But these people had understood him no better than the people in Groningen. What was that strange expression Goin had used? He opened the notebook, just to find it again.

“Bumped off!”

That was it. He had *bumped off* Julius de Coster, and they thought he was *up the pole*!

Even worse, during the few hours he had spent lying on the camp bed, eavesdropping on the conversation in the kitchen, Kees had almost thought himself briefly back in his house in Groningen, when, for instance, he could hear from the bedroom his wife chatting to the maid. They had the same habit of letting fall sentences unhurriedly, and giving their opinions of other people, as if the whole world were subject to their judgement.

As for Louis, Goin must be right: he was just a kid playing at being a gang boss, but didn't really know what he wanted . . .

Poppinga had never felt so powerful as on this station platform, as he paced up and down, looking at the tourist posters and smoking a cigar. He was soaring thousands of wingbeats above men like Louis, Goin, Julius de Coster, all those loudmouthed braggarts.

He was certain that if he bought any newspaper on the stalls, he would find some report concerning him. Would they publish his photograph again? The police were after him! People were shuddering at the idea that the Amsterdam sex maniac might be among them.

And meanwhile he had casually left his hiding-place, bought a second-class ticket, was now waiting for a train and would shortly alight in Paris, where Chief Inspector Lucas was in charge of the investigation.

Was this not proof that he, Kees Poppinga, was stronger and more intelligent than the lot of them? And he'd do better than that: he would go to Jeanne Rozier's place, precisely because that was risky and the one thing he shouldn't do!

In any case, he needed to see her. There was unfinished business between them.

The train drew in. By chance, he found a seat in a compartment where two country women in dark clothes were gossiping about events in their village, the neighbours' illnesses and the people who had died that year.

Sitting meekly in his corner, he looked at them with an insane desire to declare to them suddenly:

‘Allow me to introduce myself. Kees Poppinga, the Amsterdam sex maniac!’

No, he didn’t do it, of course. But he thought about it several times. He gave himself the secret pleasure of imagining the scene that would follow. But in spite of everything, he was the one who lifted down his travelling companions’ suitcases from the luggage rack and could not suppress an ironic smile, as he murmured politely:

‘You’re welcome, madame.’

But at heart, this was what he had wanted: to be completely alone, alone in knowing what he knew, alone in knowing who Kees Poppinga was; to wander through the crowds, coming and going between people who brushed past him without realizing, and who had all kinds of ridiculous opinions about him.

For these two women, for instance, he was an old-fashioned gentleman, the kind you don’t meet many of nowadays. For Rose . . . In fact, she had never made it clear what she thought of him, but he supposed she despised him, out of lack of imagination.

He was glad to be back in Paris, with its buses, taxis and people going in all directions, pursuing heaven only knew what pointless goals. He had all the time in the world. Picratt’s never closed before three or four in the morning, and supposing that Jeanne Rozier was out alone, she wouldn’t be home before a quarter to three at the earliest.

How strange of him not to have taken advantage of her when she was available, lying alongside him in bed. Now, on the other hand, the very thought of her . . .

But now it was different. Now that she knew his story, he felt the need to dominate her, to frighten her, since she was too intelligent to reject him as stupidly as Rose.

While he was waiting, having nothing else to do, he went up to a policeman and asked him the way to the Police Judiciaire. He had a perfect right to know, didn’t he? In all the newspaper reports about him, there had been mentions of the Police Judiciaire and Chief Inspector Lucas. He was pleased to find himself on Quai des Orfèvres and to read over a dimly lit door: ‘Police Judiciaire’. He would have liked even better to catch sight of the chief inspector himself, but that was difficult.

He contented himself with sitting for a good while on a parapet overlooking the Seine and looking up at the three lighted windows on the

first floor. In the courtyard, through the monumental arch, two police buses and a van for transporting suspects were waiting.

He walked away with reluctance. He would have liked to be able to see it from closer to. On Place Saint-Michel, he turned round again and asked a policeman, yes, another policeman, for directions to Montmartre. He had asked the way without any need to, simply for the pleasure of talking to an officer of the law. It allowed him to think:

‘If only he knew . . .’

He could not walk the streets until three in the morning, so he punctuated his stroll by going into one bar after another where, standing at the horseshoe-shaped counter, he found himself alongside other human beings whose lives were as if suspended in the moment. Some people looked preoccupied as they sipped their coffee. Others, leaning on the bar after finishing their drinks, had such vacant expressions that you wondered when and by what miracle they would suddenly come to their senses. A little girl carrying a basket of violets reminded him of Christmas Eve and the two visits that Jeanne Rozier had paid him at the tobacconist’s in Rue de Douai.

Goin must be right about that too. It was Jeanne who had persuaded Louis to take care of him. But why? Because he had impressed her? Because he hadn’t behaved towards her as an ordinary client would? Or was it because, once she knew what he had done, her curiosity was aroused?

As for the idea that she had taken pity on him, Poppinga rejected it, not only because he had no need of pity, but also because Jeanne Rozier was not the kind of woman to take pity on anyone.

‘One more hour to go!’ he noted impatiently.

As the time drew near, he thought more about her and tried to predict what would happen. From then on, whereas he had been drinking only mineral water, he started to order glasses of cognac which quickly went to his head.

And at half past two, looking at his reflection in a café mirror on Rue des Batignolles, he told himself:

‘To think that no one knows yet what’s going to happen! Not even me. Not even Jeanne, who’s waiting for it to be time to go home. Louis is in Marseille . . . Goin and his sister are fast asleep in their bedroom and fondly imagine I’m the other side of the door. Nobody knows . . .’

He asked for a newspaper and had to turn to page 5 before finding a small paragraph about himself. He felt annoyed, especially since it was just

the same as before:

Chief Inspector Lucas is continuing investigations into the murder in Amsterdam, and believes it will not be long before Poppinga is under arrest.

That was another one who thought he was clever, Chief Inspector Lucas, who really knew nothing at all!

Perhaps, of course, he was getting the newspapers to print this, in order to put the wind up Kees!

And he, Kees, would soon see if the chief inspector was as smart as he wished to appear. He asked the way to Rue Fromentin, again from a policeman, then walked up and down it three times, checking all the alleyways and corners, and felt certain no officer was stationed near number 13.

Therefore, nobody had predicted that he would be visiting Jeanne Rozier that night! Therefore, Lucas had understood nothing! So Poppinga was still ahead of them all!

And what would the chief inspector's face look like in the morning if something happened tonight? And what would all the reporters say, after obediently parroting his reassuring statements?

In short, the more action he took, the more his pursuers would lose their chance to catch him, since every one of his actions would correspond to a new hypothesis, all contradicting each other, leading the investigation into a maze!

What was there to stop him committing some act of violence? What would have prevented him earlier from attacking the two women in the train, pulling the communication cord and jumping down on the track while people came rushing through the corridors?

He easily found Picratt's, the club where he had spent his first hours in Paris, and walked about outside, waiting for it to close. When he had arrived, it was now clear, he hadn't known anything. He hadn't had time to think. And now he felt almost sorry for the man who had got off the train at Gare du Nord and been in a hurry to order champagne and brag to a prostitute.

Two women came out of the club, hostesses like Jeanne, but she was not one of them.

That forced him to contemplate with annoyance the possibility that she might be accompanied by a client, in which case everything would have to

be postponed until later, the next day perhaps.

But no! She was coming out! She was wearing her squirrel coat, with a posy of violets on the lapel, and he could hear her high heels clicking on the pavement. She looked cold. She was walking quickly, keeping close to the houses, not looking left or right, like someone who takes the same route every day. Kees followed her on the other side of the street, sure now that she wouldn't get away.

But he had a brief scare, when she went into one of the bars still open, then he was astonished to see through the window that she had ordered a café-crème and was dipping a croissant in it.

So, nobody had invited her to have supper with them! She was eating with that distracted expression that he had noticed on other people in that kind of bar. She felt in her handbag, paid, and left without wasting time.

He waited for her to buzz at the street door of her building, and at the moment the door clicked open, he approached her without a word, which made her jump. She didn't open her mouth or say anything, but there was a hint of fear in her green eyes, he was sure, before she shrugged and stood aside to let him in.

The lift was so cramped that they were touching each other. Jeanne operated it, sent it back, fumbled in her bag for her door key, then at last stammered:

'B-but what are you going to tell Louis?'

He merely smiled while looking at her and she was taken aback, since she realized that he had guessed her ruse. Only as they entered the flat, did Kees murmur:

'Louis's in Marseille.'

'Did Goin tell you that?'

'No.'

She had closed the door and switched on the light in the hall. Her lodgings consisted of three rooms plus a bathroom, all old-fashioned and cluttered, with rugs everywhere and too many cheap knickknacks, evening shoes scattered around, a sandwich on the sitting-room table alongside a half-full bottle of wine.

'What have you come here for?'

First he checked that her eyes were actually green, as he remembered, and it seemed to him that her fear made them look even greener.

'I could have called the concierge . . .'

‘What for?’

As if he was at home, he took off his coat, drank a gulp of wine straight from the bottle, and opened a door that led into the bedroom.

He noticed that on the bedside table was a telephone and resolved to keep an eye on it, but Jeanne Rozier had already caught his glance and read his thoughts.

It was fun to toy with her, because she had fast reflexes and because she was keeping cool, only letting her emotions appear in tiny, almost imperceptible signs.

‘Aren’t you going to get undressed?’ he asked, as he removed his collar and tie.

She had not yet taken off her coat, which she let fall from her shoulders with a little gesture of resignation.

‘When I heard Louis was going to Marseille, I thought at once that I could take advantage of that. Who’s that picture of, over the bed?’

‘My father.’

‘Fine-looking man. He has a remarkable moustache.’

And he sat down on a little Louis XVI chair to take off his shoes. Jeanne Rozier, by contrast, did not proceed further with undressing. After having taken a few steps into the bedroom, she stood in the middle, facing him and said:

‘You’re not proposing to come and lodge *here*, are you?’

‘Well, till tomorrow at any rate, yes.’

‘I’m sorry that’s not possible.’

She had guts. Despite herself, her eyes darted now and then to the phone. Especially when instead of replying he laughed and took off his other shoe.

‘You heard me?’

‘Yes, I heard you, but it doesn’t matter, does it? You’re forgetting that we’ve already spent one night together in the same bed. Well, I was very tired that night. And anyway I didn’t really know you. So since then, I’ve been regretting . . .’

He was still sitting down, very pleased with himself, and feeling slightly feverish, which made his voice sound hoarse.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘I didn’t want to make a big fuss downstairs, and get the concierge and other tenants woken up . . . I know the risk you’re running. But now, you’re going to get dressed at once. And leave. I can’t believe you’re crazy enough to imagine that I’d agree to this, now that—’

‘Now that what?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Now that you *know*? Come on, admit it! Now that you know what happened to Pamela. Come on, answer me. I promise you this really tickles me. For three days, I’ve been wondering what you were thinking . . .’

‘Don’t trouble yourself!’

‘Three days I’ve been telling myself: “This girl isn’t as stupid as the others . . .”’

‘Maybe so, but all the same, you’d better be on your way now.’

‘And if I’m not?’

He was standing in his stockinged feet, his shirt button pressing on his Adam’s apple.

‘It’ll be the worse for you.’

She had snatched from inside a small cupboard a revolver with a pearl handle, and was holding it, not aimed at him, but in a way that was equally worrying.

‘You’d fire that gun at me?’

‘I don’t know. I might.’

‘Why? Yes, I’m asking you a question: why don’t you want to, tonight? The first time, it was *me* that didn’t want to.’

‘And I’m asking *you* to get out now!’

She had managed to move closer to the telephone. Her movements were clumsy, betraying a fear she did not want to show. Perhaps it was her fear that caused it all, that drove Kees towards the crisis. But he still did not lose his talent for acting.

‘Look, Jeanne,’ he said, pretending to have a catch in his throat, and dropping his gaze, ‘you’re being mean to me, when you’re the only person that understands me and—’

‘Don’t come near me.’

‘No, all right. I won’t, but I beg you to listen and give me an answer. I know Goin and his sister wanted to turn me in to the police.’

‘Who told you that?’ she retorted, energetically.

‘I overheard them talking. And I know Louis wanted to get me to pay him a lot of money—’

‘That’s not true!’

‘Yes it is! He may not have told you that, but he did tell Goin, who repeated it to his sister. I was listening to their conversation. So I climbed

out of the window and here I am . . .’

She must have been unsettled by this, since she was less on the defensive and was thinking, looking down at the carpet. He, not missing any of her changes of expression, carried on:

‘You must have known something too, and *you’re* going to give me away as well, or why would you grab a gun?’

‘It wasn’t for that.’

She had raised her head sharply, with an air of sincerity.

‘Why then?’

‘You don’t understand?’

‘You mean I scare you?’

‘No.’

‘Well, then . . .’

‘Nothing.’

He had managed to move three steps nearer. Another two and he would be up close to her. And now the die was cast. He had not thought about what he was going to do, but he knew that from now on, things were going to take their course.

‘It affected you, did it, knowing that—’

‘Be quiet!’

‘If only she hadn’t been so stupid—’

‘Can’t you just stop talking . . .’

In her impatience, she waved her arm in a way that made the revolver less threatening for a moment. Kees took advantage of it with amazing speed of reaction. He leaped upon her, pushed her over backwards on to the bed and seized the gun. At the same time, to stop her crying out, he put the pillow across her face and leaned on it with all his weight.

‘Swear that you won’t call the—’

She was struggling. She was strong. The pillow slipped, and then he hit her on the head with the butt of the revolver, once, twice, three times, because he was concerned only with getting her to lie still.

When he put his shoes back on, after washing his hands, since he had noticed blood on them, he felt as calm as after Pamela, but it was a heavier kind of calm, with a trace of sadness perhaps? As was proved when, once he was ready to go, he went to stand by the bed, patted Jeanne’s red hair, and muttered:

‘That wasn’t very clever of you, was it . . .’

Only on the stairs did he shrug his shoulders, and express the consoling thought:

‘Well now, it’s well and truly over.’

He knew he was the only person who would understand the workings of his mind. What exactly *was* over, he couldn’t explain. Just everything, anything that would connect him to other people. From now on he was alone, completely alone, alone against the whole world.

For a moment, he panicked. On reaching the ground floor, he tried in vain to open the door. He did not know the way door mechanisms worked in Paris, with a wall switch, and lost patience, anguished sweat pouring from his brow.

He even briefly considered going up to the first floor and waiting till morning, when the other tenants would be going out. But by chance someone pressed the outside buzzer, and the door opened. He saw a couple come in and turn their heads in astonishment as the shadowy figure disappeared.

More people who would tell the police about him tomorrow!

Montmartre was calm. The illuminated signs were all out. A few taxis were still driving slowly past, offering their services.

But what was the point of taking a taxi, since he had no idea where he was going?

Nevertheless something was troubling him, the image of Jeanne Rozier, who might not be regaining consciousness yet and who . . .

Too bad! He stopped the next taxi and had some difficulty explaining what he wanted.

‘Look, what I need you to do is go to 13, Rue Fromentin. And there you should go up to the third floor, to Mademoiselle Rozier. She’s waiting for a taxi to come right away and take her to the station. Here’s twenty francs on account.’

The driver looked suspicious.

‘Are you sure this lady . . .’

‘Yes, I tell you she wants a taxi!’

The man shrugged and started his engine, while Poppinga went striding off down towards the city centre. What did it matter to him whether the police began searching for him sooner rather than later, since he was certain he would escape them?

He was enjoying wondering whether Jeanne Rozier would give a detailed description of him, and whether she would help the police. Something – flying in the face of common sense – told him that she would not.

He was tired. He wanted to go to sleep for twelve hours, twenty-four even, as he had done recently.

If he went into a hotel unaccompanied, they would ask him to fill out a card and ask for his papers. But had Jeanne not shown him how it was done?

He kept going, taking long steps, until he met a streetwalker still out despite the late hour. He signalled to her then fell in behind her. Once in the bedroom, he did nevertheless take the precaution of putting his money under the pillow.

‘Are you foreign?’

‘Never you mind, I’m sleepy. Here’s a hundred francs. Now just leave me alone.’

Whereupon he dropped off to sleep at once, and started dreaming he was Kees Poppinga again, that Mama was dressing quietly, and looking in the mirror to squeeze a pimple, while downstairs the maid was clattering utensils in the kitchen. Only now the servant was Rose. And later, she said to him, when he went down and crept up behind her:

‘I’ll come back to the kitchen when you’ve gone.’

Whose voice was it that whispered: ‘Watch out, the tin marked salt really contains sugar. Not at all nice in oxtail soup . . .’

He struggled to recognize this voice, and suddenly light dawned: it was Jeanne Rozier’s and he was standing in his stockinged feet, with his collar off, in the middle of the kitchen, while the house was full of guests. She was laughing and ordering him with mocking affection:

‘Come on, get dressed quickly. Don’t you realize that you’ll be recognized?’



7.

How Kees Poppinga created his home on the move, and how he deemed it his duty to lend a hand to the French police investigation

You start with a little detail, sometimes very trivial, and you end, without meaning to, by discovering some general principles.

And that morning, as he looked in the mirror – something he had always done with great seriousness – Poppinga realized he had not shaved since he had left Holland, with the result that, although his beard was neither heavy nor fast-growing, his appearance was unprepossessing.

He turned to the bed, where a woman whom he did not know was putting on her stockings.

‘When you’re ready, you can go out and buy me a safety razor, some shaving soap, a shaving brush and a toothbrush.’

Since he had already given her the money in advance, she might well not have come back, but she was an honest woman, and on her return insisted on giving him an exact account of what she had spent. Then, not knowing whether she should stay or go, and not daring to ask, she sat back down on the bed and watched Poppinga shaving.

It was one of those streets looking on to Faubourg Montmartre, a hotel of much lower standing than the one in Rue Victor-Massé. In fact, it stood in exactly the same relation to the other hotel as the woman sitting on the bed did compared to Jeanne Rozier, that is three or four categories lower.

On the other hand, this woman, whose name Kees did not even know, was genuinely trying to please him, working hard to find out what he preferred, as she proved by saying with a sigh:

‘You’re the sad type, aren’t you? An unhappy affair of the heart, that’s what I’d say.’

She said this with the firm yet tentative voice of someone reading it in the cards.

‘Why do you say that?’ he asked, soaping one cheek.

‘Because I’m beginning to know what men are like. How old do you think I am? Well, as you see me now, I’m thirty-eight, my dear! I know I don’t look it. I’ve seen them come and go, men like you, they take me to a hotel and then don’t do anything. And most of them, you know, sooner or later they start to talk, and talk, they tell me their whole life stories. We’re useful for that, aren’t we? We listen to it all, and it doesn’t go any further.’

It was almost a domestic scene with Kees, the paterfamilias, bare-chested, his braces hanging down to his calves: the woman chatting amiably to him while she waited for him to get ready. The funniest thing was that while he did gather that she thought he looked ‘the sad type’ – another new personality which was being foisted on to him, and which he mustn’t forget to note down – in the end he had stopped listening to her.

The razor had sent his thoughts in a different direction. For a moment, he wondered whether he shouldn’t buy an attaché case to carry a few belongings in.

Because in a respectable hotel, if he arrived for the night alone, with no luggage, he might attract unwelcome attention. With an attaché case, he could pass for a commercial traveller. But then what would he do with it during the day? Put it in a left-luggage locker? Deposit it in a café?

At any rate, he had made up his mind never to sleep in the same place twice. He had noticed that if fugitives got caught, it was because someone in their proximity had suddenly been struck by a suspicious detail.

‘So, no attaché case!’ he muttered to himself, as he cleaned the razor carefully and wrapped it in a piece of newspaper.

What was more, he might run the risk of being labelled ‘*the man with an attaché case*’, and that simple object might be enough to give him away.

His superiority over the heroes of stories he had read in the papers, thieves, murderers, crooks on the run, was that he considered these matters in the same way that in the past he had considered the affairs of Julius de Coster’s company: coolly, with total detachment, as if they did not concern him.

In fact, he was looking for a solution to the solution, and he suddenly asked his companion:

‘Do you have to show identity papers in a hotel like this one?’

‘No, never! Sometimes they ask you for your name, to fill in the card. And about every two or three months, the police arrive in the middle of the night and wake everyone up. Especially if there’s some important foreign person passing through Paris, in case of an attack.’

Kees wrapped his shaving brush, soap and toothbrush in the same way as the razor, then put everything in his pockets, which already held his notebook and a pencil: everything he needed.

It was practical. He could go wherever he liked, sleep in a different hotel every night, maybe in different neighbourhoods in Paris. There was always the risk of the famous police raid the woman mentioned, but he calculated that that was scarcely one chance in a hundred.

‘Are you going to take me to lunch?’ she asked.

‘I’d rather not.’

‘I won’t insist. I just said it in case you might like it. So you don’t need me any more?’

‘No.’

They parted like that, on the pavement, now encumbered with street vendors and their barrows of fruit and vegetables. Poppinga no longer had his wristwatch, but he could see a clock showing 12.15.

This neighbourhood suited him quite well, because it was so busy, thronged with people of all categories, and full of bars with customers spilling out of them.

‘With the three thousand francs I’ve got left,’ he calculated, ‘I’ll have enough for about a month, and by then I’ll have worked out a way to get some money.’

From that point on, he became careful with the cash he had been so free with previously, since it now had special value, like the razor in his pocket and the absence of an attaché case, as did every detail in the plan for living which he was devising.

One such detail was that he stood for an hour in front of the Paris street map, outside a Métro entrance. He had a remarkable memory for topography. The different neighbourhoods, the main thoroughfares, the boulevards, all found their place inside his head as accurately as on the map, and when he set off again, he was capable of finding his way round Paris without needing to ask directions.

He had no appetite for lunch, and went into a bar where he drank two large glasses of milk with some croissants, then was back on the boulevards

in time to buy the afternoon papers which had just appeared.

Although all morning he had been pretending not to think about it, he was nevertheless preoccupied with what had happened to Jeanne Rozier, and he turned the pages feverishly, then was stupefied, vexed, and finally outraged, not to find a single line about her. Nor was there anything about himself, as if the whole story relating to Pamela was now completely forgotten, although many column inches were devoted to some obscure incident that had happened on the Paris–Bâle express.

Obviously, if Jeanne Rozier was dead, the papers would have been informed . . . So . . .

Unless . . . What if it was a trap, what if the police were keeping it quiet, hoping for him to make a false move? If only he could just see Chief Inspector Lucas, even through a window! He would have been able to get some idea. At the very least, he would have been able to see what kind of man he was, and therefore the kind of tricks he might play . . .

Well, too bad! There was one thing he could do without running much risk. Since there had been a telephone on Jeanne's bedside table.

He went into a café, looked up Rozier in the directory, requested the number and heard a voice he did not recognize, belonging, as far as he could judge, to a woman of middle age.

'Hello! Is Mademoiselle Rozier there, please?'

'Who's speaking?'

'Tell her it's a friend . . .'

So, that meant she wasn't dead! There was a pause, then:

'Hello. Can I take a message? Mademoiselle Rozier is not well, and can't come to the phone.'

'Is it serious?'

'No, not very serious, but—'

Enough! He hung up and went back to sit at his table. A quarter of an hour later, he called the waiter over and asked for some writing materials.

He was in a bad temper. He thought for a long time about what to say. Finally, in a firm and legible hand, he wrote:

Dear Chief Inspector,

I beg to inform you that another event took place last night, which may have some bearing on the Poppinga case. It might be in your interest to go to the apartment of Mademoiselle Rozier in Rue Fromentin, to ask her how she came to be in the state in which you will find her.

He hesitated, wondering whether he would reveal any more, then continued with malicious satisfaction, as he thought about Goin and especially his sister:

And I will take this opportunity to help the French police, which is taking such pains over me that it is only fair I should take some pains in return.

It should be possible for you to apprehend before too long a gang of big-time car thieves. This was the gang that, among other crimes, stole three cars in Montmartre on Christmas Eve.

So you would do well to station some men at night around the Goin & Boret garage in Juvisy. There would be no point in doing so tonight or tomorrow, as nothing will happen since the leader of the gang is in Marseille. But if you start watching the garage the following night, I should be greatly surprised if you did not succeed in making an arrest by 1 January.

Please believe me, Chief Inspector, to be your devoted servant
Kees Poppinga

He read it over with satisfaction, sealed the envelope, wrote the address and called the waiter across.

‘Tell me, please. If I post a letter now, when will it be delivered?’

‘If it’s to Paris, tomorrow morning. But you can send it by the pneumatic tube service and it’ll get there in less than two hours.’

He was learning something every hour!

So he sent his letter by pneumatic tube, then left the district he was in, since he had deliberately used headed paper carrying the café’s name.

It was four o’clock. The weather was quite cold and a kind of fine mist had started to curl round the gas lamps. As he walked, he came to the Seine exactly where he had predicted he would, that is at the Pont Neuf, which he crossed. He was not walking aimlessly, but had a precise goal. Now that he had taken care of his business, he wanted to relax by having a game of chess.

Let’s say a stranger had arrived in Groningen knowing nobody, where would he have a chance of finding someone to play against? Only in one place, a large café near the university, frequented by students!

Why would Paris be different? So he headed towards the Latin Quarter, and then up its main street, Boulevard Saint-Michel. He was certainly a little disconcerted, since it had nothing in common with the quiet town of Groningen, but did not allow himself to be intimidated.

In a dozen cafés which he observed through the windows, nobody was playing any kind of game, and the customers sitting there looked as if they did not intend staying long.

On the other hand, glancing across the boulevard, he noticed on the first floor of a brasserie, shadows outlined against the curtains, holding billiard cues.

He felt as proud as if he had just won a game. Next moment, he felt even more pleased with himself when, after climbing the stairs, he found himself in an austere and smoke-filled room, where lamps with green shades hung over a dozen billiard tables, and where people were playing backgammon, cards or chess in other corners.

With as much solemnity as if he were back in his Dutch club, he took off his overcoat, hung it on the coat-stand, went to wash his hands in a basin, ran a comb through his hair, cleaned his nails, and then sat down next to two young men who were playing chess. Finally, he ordered a beer and lit a cigar.

It was a pity he had decided he could not go to any place more than once, because this café was exactly the kind where he would have liked to spend every afternoon! There was not a single woman in sight, which was already very satisfactory! On the other hand, there were plenty of young men, students, some of whom had taken off their jackets to play billiards.

One of the chess players was Japanese: wearing horn-rimmed glasses, he was facing a blond boy with ruddy cheeks, whose face registered every one of his emotions.

Kees, still acting as he did in Groningen, took out his gold-framed spectacles and wiped them before putting them on. After that, many minutes went by, during which time he did nothing but watch the chessboard, where all the pieces took their place in his mind, just as the streets of Paris had.

Even the smell in here, a mixture of beer, cigar smoke and sawdust, was like the club back in Groningen! Even the habits of the waiter, who kept breaking off from work to stand behind the players and watch a few moves with a disapproving air!

In circumstances such as these, Kees was capable of sitting still for hours, without uncrossing his legs, letting the ash on the end of his cigar reach three or four centimetres!

It was only towards the very end, when the Japanese player looked particularly depressed, and had been staring at the board for ten minutes without deciding on a move, that Kees flicked off the ash and said mildly:

‘You’ll checkmate him now in two moves, won’t you?’

The young man turned towards him in astonishment, but looked even more unhappy, since he had thought he was well and truly beaten. His partner was equally stupefied, since he could not see how he could possibly be checkmated, when he was on the point of winning.

There was a silence. The Japanese man put his hand out towards his castle, then pulled it back as if the piece were red hot, glancing at Popinga as if for advice, while the fair-haired player sighed, after scanning the board again.

‘Well, I certainly don’t see how . . .’

‘Will you allow me?’

The Japanese player nodded. The other young man waited, with a sceptical expression.

‘I’ll move the knight here. Now what will *you* do?’

The fair-haired man declared, without a moment’s thought:

‘I’ll take it with my castle.’

‘Quite right. Next I’ll move my queen forward two squares. What will you do now?’

This time, the young man could find no reply, remained somewhat lost for a moment, then moved his king one square backwards.

‘And there we are. I move my queen one more square, and it’s checkmate! It wasn’t so hard, was it?’

After this kind of exploit, he would adopt a modest expression, though his face was shining with satisfaction. The two young men were so impressed that they did not think of starting another game.

But the Japanese player, who had tried to understand the moves, finally said:

‘Would you like a game yourself?’

‘You can take my place,’ the other one told him.

‘No, no! If you like, I’ll play you both at the same time . . . You can each take a board.’

When he rubbed them together, as he did now, his hands could be seen to be smooth, a little plump, indeed, but white, shapely and delicate.

‘Waiter! Can you fetch us another chess set?’

Chief Inspector Lucas would not yet have received the letter, but by the time the two games of chess were over, he would have it in his hand and would no doubt be hastening to Rue Fromentin.

The youngsters were still intimidated, especially since Popinga, sitting on the banquette against the wall, facing them and the two chessboards, was also taking a boastful pleasure in following with his eyes a game of billiards.

He played without hesitation on both boards. His opponents took time to consider their moves, especially the Japanese student, who was determined to win this time.

‘Now how can I find a list of cafés where there’s chess?’ Popinga was thinking meanwhile.

He calculated that there must be plenty of them: while studying the map of Paris that afternoon, he had realized something. In Groningen, as in most towns, there was a centre, just the one, and the houses were grouped round it like the pulp of a fruit round the kernel.

But Kees had noted that while there are perhaps one, two or three central points in Paris, every neighbourhood also had its little centre with cafés, cinemas, dance halls and busy streets.

So someone who lived in Grenelle wouldn’t come over to Boulevard Saint-Michel to play chess, nor would someone who lived near the Parc Montsouris. Accordingly, one would only have to look, and in each district .

..

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, pretending to be embarrassed. ‘Why don’t you take your bishop back? Otherwise your queen’s threatened.’

This was to the blond young man, who reddened and stammered:

‘But I’ve played the move.’

‘Never mind, please go ahead.’

All the while the young Japanese man was glancing surreptitiously across at his friend’s board, trying not to make the same mistakes.

‘You’re students, are you? Studying what?’

‘Medicine,’ the Japanese player said.

The fair-haired boy wanted to be a dentist, which suited him on the whole.

In spite of his anxious concentration, it was the Japanese student who had to surrender first and the other one tried all the harder, but held out only a few minutes longer.

‘Can I buy you a drink?’ the young man felt obliged to say,

‘Not at all. I’ll buy you a round.’

‘But we lost!’

Nevertheless he insisted on buying their drinks, and lit another cigar as he leaned back on the banquette.

‘What you have to do, you know, is keep all the pieces in your head, never forget that the bishop protects the queen, the queen protects the knight, and . . .’

He had been almost on the point of saying ‘. . . Louis must have been contacted by Jeanne Rozier and already be on the train from Marseille. Round about now, Chief Inspector Lucas will be arriving at Rue Fromentin, where Jeanne will be wondering what’s happening. And in Juvisy, Goin will be too scared to telephone for fear of being compromised, while Rose—’

He stopped himself and went on:

‘And find out whether your opponent has a method, but don’t have one yourself. Suppose I’d had a method . . . I might have beaten one of you, but the other would have been able to notice my tactics and catch me off guard . . .’

He was so pleased with himself! To the point that when the two young men left him, with many thanks, he stayed there, cigar in mouth, fingers tucked into his waistcoat pockets, following the game of billiards from a distance and finding it hard to resist his desire to go and play that as well.

Because he would have been quite capable of having the same success at billiards as at chess, taking a cue from another player’s hands and winning fifty points in a row.

What his opponents had not been able to see, the whole time they were playing, was that opposite him, on the other side of the room, there were mirrors. The lighting was low and the air was thick with the smoke from pipes and cigarettes, making Poppinga’s reflection vague and mysterious, as he observed it complacently, puffing away at his cigar.

It was six o’clock by the enamelled face of the café clock. To pass the time, he took out his little notebook and thought for a long while before writing anything.

Because he had realized that he would have many hours to spend every day, even if he slept as much as possible. He couldn’t wander the streets for more than three or four hours; it was tiring and in the end dispiriting. He would have to organize some regular forms of distraction, like this one, and make them last as long as possible, so as to remain in good shape and keep a clear head.

In the end he wrote:

Tuesday 28 December. Left Juvisy via the window. Two women on train. Rue Fromentin with Jeanne. She wasn't in laughing mood. Took care to knock her out but gently. Feel sure I'll see her again.

Wednesday 29 December. Slept Faubourg Montmartre with woman, forgot to ask her name. She said I looked 'the sad type'. Bought essential toiletries. Wrote to Lucas and played chess. Feeling in excellent form.

That was enough. The proof was that it helped him remember the past hours so clearly that a detail came back to him: the attaché case. He had not bought one so as not to be labelled 'the man with the attaché case'. What was important was not to have some characteristic that was too conspicuous. And looking in the mirror, he realized that his cigar was a part of his profile. The two young men, for example, would not forget that he had been smoking a cigar! The waiter in the brasserie where he had written his letter would remember that too. He looked round and noted that out of the fifty or so customers, he was one of only two smoking cigars.

And Jeanne Rozier knew that! As did Goin! As did the head waiter at Picratt's! And the woman who had left at midday had also noticed it.

So if he did not wish to become 'the man who smokes cigars', he would have to take up something else, a pipe or cigarettes, and it was with reluctance that he decided to do so, since his cigar was almost a part of himself.

Having made the decision, he acted immediately, crushed out what remained of the cigar, and filled the ridiculous pipe he had bought in Juvisy.

By now, Chief Inspector Lucas must surely be at Rue Fromentin, carrying out his investigation, questioning the concierge and probably the two tenants whom he had met in the corridor. It would be amusing to phone him and say:

'Hello? Chief Inspector Lucas? Kees Poppinga here! What do you think of the leads I've given you? Don't you see, I've given you some clues and I'm being a good sport!'

But that was too dangerous. He had a suspicion that telephone conversations could be tapped, which however did not prevent him having a little fun. There was a phone-booth in a corner of the café. He obtained some tokens and telephoned three newspapers, the ones that had published the longest articles about him. When he got through to the third, he even asked by name for the reporter who had signed the article.

'Hello . . . Kees Poppinga attacked another woman last night in Paris! You can check that by going to number 13, Rue Fromentin . . . Yes . . . What did

you say?’

At the other end, a voice was repeating:

‘Who’s speaking? Is that you, Marchandean?’

The reporter must have taken him for one of the newspaper’s regular informants.

‘No, this is *not* Marchandean. It’s Poppinga himself speaking! Good evening, Monsieur Saladin. And try not to write any more rubbish in your paper; in particular, stop saying I’m a maniac . . .’

He picked up his hat and coat, went downstairs and made his way, still on foot, towards a neighbourhood he had selected for the night, near Bastille.

This was the only way to do it: keep changing not only the restaurant or hotel, but also the class of establishment. He was prepared to swear that since he had now twice spent the night at hotels of a certain category, the police would be looking for him in similar hotels. And he would also be prepared to swear that this very evening, Chief Inspector Lucas would be searching most of the rooming-houses of that type in Montmartre.

Just as the two young chess players would be expecting him to try the same gambit twice.

So he had decided to go to the Bastille area, eat supper from a fixed-price menu at four or five francs, and sleep in a ten-franc hotel.

And he had not yet made up his mind whether he would sleep alone or whether, as he had twice before, he would find a bedfellow.

He thought about this as he went along Rue Saint-Antoine. He was aware that that could be at least as dangerous as the attaché case or the cigar. He imagined the police instructions saying:

Habitually spends the night in a cheap hotel with a woman he’s picked up.

And the police would be watching all the places frequented by streetwalkers.

That would be unwise, he concluded.

And indeed it would be unwise to play chess in a different place every day, since that too would be added to the description that would circulate:

Spends his afternoons playing chess in brasseries in Paris and the suburbs.

At any rate, that would be how *he* would have drawn up the instructions if he were in Lucas’ place, nor would he omit to mention that in the wanted man’s pockets would be found a razor, shaving brush, soap and toothbrush!

And what if a version of this description were to appear in every newspaper in Paris?

He was walking through the crowd, past the illuminated shop windows, and had to smile as he imagined the consequences of such a notice.

In the first place, in all the cafés where chess was played, the customers would be eyeing each other suspiciously, and perhaps during their game the waiter would be searching their coats, especially grey coats, to check that they contained no razor or shaving brush.

As for the women walking the streets . . . they would suspect all their clients of being Poppinga, and Kees felt sure there would be many reports to the police.

‘No, I mustn’t,’ he told himself once more.

And yet he was already tempted to become this character he had described. He resisted the temptation, tried to keep a cool head, and decided that for a change after dining he would go to a cinema.

He ordered the five-franc menu in a cheap restaurant, but ended up paying eleven, since he couldn’t resist the extras. He was served by waitresses in white aprons, and he really wondered what the one attending his table might think of him. Out of curiosity, he left her a tip of five francs.

She would surely be astonished, and look hard at him, and soon connect this man in grey, with a foreign accent, with the sex maniac the papers were talking about.

But no, not at all. She put the money in her pocket and carried on with her work, as if he had given her fifty centimes or two francs!

The cinema was across the road: the Saint-Paul. He went into a box, since he had no wish not to be seen. Here the usherette was dressed in red, rather like the bellhop in the Carlton Hotel in Amsterdam.

He tried the opposite experiment. He did not give her a tip at all, and she merely walked off muttering something, taking no more notice of him.

It was the limit! It was as if they were forgetting all about him! As if there were a conspiracy of silence around him.

Jeanne Rozier had not complained to the police. The papers were not mentioning the investigation, Goin was lying low. Louis was still in Marseille and the woman from that morning would simply think of him as the sad type, like so many she had met!

In Groningen, he never went to the cinema, because Mama considered it a vulgar form of entertainment and in any case in the winter they went to

the Thursday subscription concerts, which was quite enough in the way of distractions.

At the Saint-Paul cinema, Popinga sensed a feverish kind of atmosphere. He was not yet acquainted with this kind of popular picture house where over a thousand people were crammed together, eating oranges and sucking lemon drops.

Behind him, there was a balcony and when he turned round he could see hundreds of faces illuminated by the glow from the screen, which impressed him.

What if someone were to cry out suddenly:

‘That’s him! The Amsterdam maniac, the man who . . .’

In the surrounding boxes, by contrast, sat plump women in fur coats, young women with soft pink hands, stolid men, all the prosperous shopkeepers of the neighbourhood.

During the intermission, he felt a kind of vertigo, and did not dare mingle with the crowd heading for the bar and cloakrooms. He watched the advertisements and one for furniture reminded him how they had bought their own in Groningen, and Mama had ordered catalogues from all over Holland.

And what would she be doing now, Mama? What would she be thinking? She was the only person who had spoken of an attack of amnesia, no doubt because they had once read in the *Telegraaf* a serial story about the Great War in which a German soldier who was traumatized had forgotten even his own name, and had returned home after ten years to find his wife had remarried and that his children did not recognize him.

And what about Julius de Coster? While drinking himself under the table at the Petit Saint-Georges he had said a great deal, but he had been clever enough, in spite of that, not to reveal where he was going. From what Popinga knew of him, he would not be in Paris, but more likely in London, where he felt more at home. He had no doubt put away a nest-egg there under an assumed name, and would be using it to create another business and make more money.

As the crowd returned to their seats, the lights dimmed and a mauve glow covered the screen, while the orchestra played a very sentimental and languorous tune, which touched Popinga. He clapped wildly like everyone else, but on the other hand he did not like the big picture, which was about a lawyer and professional secrecy.

Not far from him, a fat woman in a mink coat, the best-dressed person in the boxes, kept saying to her husband: 'But why doesn't he tell the truth? He's an idiot.'

Then it was time to go, the slow shuffle towards the dark cold tunnel of the empty street, where the shops were shut and cars were moving off.

Popinga had spotted a hotel at the corner of Rue de Birague, a hotel which from its appearance would be cheap and uncomfortable.

What proved it was the kind of place he wanted was that, not fifty metres away, a woman's silhouette was standing in the shadows.

Should he take her with him? Or not? Of course, earlier, he had decided .

..

But it didn't matter. The police couldn't be on his trail yet.

The truth was that he did not like to be alone at night, nor especially to wake up in the morning and find himself alone. If it happened, he was reduced to looking at himself in the mirror and pulling faces, asking himself:

'What if I had a mouth like that? Or a nose like that?'

Very well! One more time. Just the one! If only to discover what kind of woman could be picked up in this dark Rue de Birague! He thrust his hands into his pockets, looking casual, and exactly when he expected it, a timid voice whispered:

'Coming with me, dear?'

He pretended to hesitate, turned round and saw by the light of the gas lamp a young, thin, pale face, a flimsy coat, and unkempt hair poking out from under a beret.

'She'll do,' he decided.

And he followed her. He knew now how it was done. They went past a desk where a large placid-looking woman was playing patience.

'Number 7,' she declared.

Ah! Number 7 again!

There was no separate bathroom, but a curtain in front of a china wash-basin. Popinga, without looking at his companion, was already setting out his shaving tackle.

'You want to stay the night?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Ah!'

This did not seem to please her. But that was too bad!

‘You’re not from round here, then?’

‘No, not at all.’

‘You’re a foreigner?’

‘What about you?’

‘I’m from Brittany,’ she said, taking off her beret. ‘You’ll be kind to me, won’t you? I saw you coming out of the cinema just now.’

She was talking for the sake of it, perhaps to please him, and indeed it made the room seem more homely, while he proceeded meticulously to get ready for the night, checked that the bed was clean enough and lay down with a sigh of ease.

Someone whose expression he would have liked to see now would be Lucas’s wife. What might the inspector be saying about him, as *he* got into bed? Because after all, like everyone else, he would have to go to bed sooner or later!

‘Shall I leave the light on?’

She was so skinny that he preferred to look away.



8.

On the difficulty of getting rid of old newspapers and the usefulness of a fountain-pen and a wristwatch

There was almost nothing to write in the red notebook that morning:

Real name Zulma. Gave her 20 francs and she didn't dare object. Sighed while I got dressed: I'm sure you prefer fatter girls. If you'd said, I'd have brought my friend along.
Dirty feet.

He also noted that he needed to buy a watch, since while he could look at clocks on buildings or in cafés when he was outside, it was awkward not to know the time first thing in the morning.

He was surprised now, for example, to find himself out on the street at eight in the morning, his ears having been deceived by the bustle of an early-rising neighbourhood.

As Zulma walked away in her green coat, too broad-shouldered for her slight figure, Popinga approached a newspaper stall and had something of a shock.

All the papers were finally talking about him, across two or three columns on the front page! They had not printed his photograph, lacking any that differed from the one published already, but they displayed pictures of Jeanne Rozier and of her bedroom.

He had to restrain himself from buying every one of them and hurrying into a café to read them.

It was difficult to remain cool, when there were columns and columns devoted to him, carrying many opinions about him, no doubt of various kinds. Around him, passers-by were coming up to the news stand, buying a paper, just one, before hastening down into the Métro.

He chose three dailies, the most important ones, and went to sit in a bar on Place de la Bastille. Nobody would have suspected the turmoil going on inside him as he drank his café-crème and read and re-read the articles, sometimes with delight, sometimes with disgust, but always at fever pitch.

How was he going to manage in practical terms? He had decided to keep these articles, but on the other hand, he couldn't walk about with dozens of newspapers in his pockets.

He reflected for a while, then went downstairs to the washroom where, with his penknife, he cut out all the passages concerning him. Then he had to get rid of the mutilated pages, and concluded that the only way was to throw them into the lavatory, which took him about half an hour, since the wedges of paper were hard to destroy. He had to keep pulling the flush, wait every time for the cistern to fill up again, so that when he went back upstairs to the bar, they thought he must be unwell.

A change of tactics was called for, he resolved, with respect to the twenty or so other newspapers which he bought in the course of the day, always in threes, so as not to attract too much attention.

He read the first three in a bistro on the corner of Boulevard Henri-IV and the Seine embankment, then he threw the unwanted pages into the river.

For the next set, he found another café, on the Austerlitz embankment this time, then proceeded along the Seine, in several stops, until he reached Quai de Bercy.

Since there was no comfortable place to sit in that district, he returned for the afternoon to the neighbourhood around Gare de Lyon, where he found the kind of brasserie he liked, and at two o'clock, having taken a seat sheltered by the stove, he set to work, after buying a fountain-pen, as he had left his behind in Groningen.

If he had made this outlay – eighty francs for the watch, thirty-two for the pen – it was because he had a serious task in front of him, and experience had shown him that it was no good trying to write with the pens provided in cafés.

He simply asked for some paper, then he began in small regular handwriting: he knew this would take a long time and he didn't want to weary his wrist:

Dear Sir,

This letter was addressed to the editor in chief of the principal Parisian daily, the one that had devoted almost three entire columns to him, and had also sent a correspondent to Holland for two days. If Kees chose this newspaper, it was not simply because of its wide circulation, but because it was the only one to have printed an intelligent headline:

Pamela's killer taunts the police, and alerts them to a fresh crime that had gone undetected

He had plenty of time. He could take trouble over his sentences. The stove was roaring like the one in Groningen, and the tables were filled by quiet customers waiting to catch their trains.

Dear Sir,

First of all, I would ask you to forgive my poor French, but I have had little opportunity to practise it, these recent years in Holland.

Now imagine that in every newspaper, people who do not know you at all rush into print to tell the world that you are 'like this', or 'like that', when it is not true, and you are completely different. I am sure you would dislike it, and would wish to make the truth known.

Your correspondent went to Groningen and questioned people there, but either those people could not have known the truth, or they were telling deliberate lies, or in some cases gave him false information inadvertently.

I wish to set the record straight, and will begin at the beginning, since I hope that you will publish this document, in which every word is the unvarnished truth, and which will demonstrate how a man can be the victim of what other people say.

In the first place, your article refers to my family. It does so through the testimony of my wife, who declared to your correspondent:

'I cannot understand what has happened, and there was no sign of this before. Kees came from an excellent family: he received a very good higher education. When we were married, he was a calm and thoughtful young man, who wanted only to set up home. Since then, and for sixteen years, he has been a good husband, a good father. His health has always been perfect, though I should say that last month, when there was ice on the ground, he slipped and hit his head. And perhaps that is what has precipitated this trouble in his mind, and some kind of amnesia. Certainly he cannot have been aware of what he was doing, and cannot be held responsible for his actions . . .'

Kees ordered another coffee and was on the point of asking for a cigar, when he remembered his decision and, with a sigh, packed a pipe, re-read these few lines and set about refuting them.

Now, my dear sir, this is what I have to say on the subject:

1. I do not come from an excellent family, but you will understand that my wife, whose father was a burgomaster, prefers to say so to journalists. My mother was a midwife and my father was an architect. Only it was my mother who provided the family income. My father, if he went to see clients, spent his time chatting and drinking with them, because he was too jovial and sociable by nature. After that, he would forget to draw up an estimate, or

he would overlook some detail in the work needed for the project, so he was always in financial trouble.

He didn't give up hope. He would sigh:
'I've been too kind!'

But my mother saw it very differently, and not a day went by, as I recall, without a scene at home: they became violent quarrels when my father had had too much to drink, and my mother would scream to my sister and me:

'Take a look at this man and try never to be like him! He'll drive me to my grave!'

2. Now you see, my dear sir, that my wife was not telling the truth. Not even about the good education: although I did attend the College of Navigation, I had no money to spend, and could never go out with my friends, so I ended up bitter and resentful.

In short, our family fell upon hard times, though we took care to conceal this from anyone else. For instance, even on days when all we had to eat was bread, my mother would always have a couple of saucepans sitting on the stove, in case anyone called. So that they would believe she was preparing a splendid meal!

I met my wife just after I finished my studies. She claims now, because it sounds better, that we married for love.

That isn't true. My wife lived in a little village, where her father was burgomaster, and she wanted to live in a big town like Groningen.

I was flattered to be marrying the daughter of a wealthy and respected man, and one, moreover, who had been in boarding school until she was eighteen.

If it had not been for her, I would have gone to sea. But she declared:

'I'll never marry a sailor, because they drink and chase women.'

He took the article out of his pocket to read it again, although he knew it almost by heart.

3. According to Mme Poppinga again, I was a good husband and father for sixteen years. That is no more true than the rest. If I never cheated on my wife, that was simply because in Groningen it is quite impossible to do so without it being known, and then Mme Poppinga would have made my life a misery.

She would not have screamed like my mother. She would have done the same as she did whenever I happened to buy something she didn't like, or smoked too many cigars. She would say:

'A fine thing, to be sure!'

Then she would refuse to speak to me for two or three days, drifting round the house looking the most mournful of women. If the children wondered why, she would sigh:

'It's your father's fault. He doesn't understand me.'

Since I'm a man of equable nature, I preferred to avoid scenes, and managed to do so for sixteen years, on condition I could escape for one evening a week to play chess, and occasionally billiards.

When I lived with my mother, I dreamed of having money like other people, so that I could go out on the town with my friends. I dreamed of having good clothes instead of wearing my father's hand-me-downs.

When I was living in our home, that is with my wife, for sixteen years I felt envious of people who could just leave the house of an evening without saying where they were going, people you might see arm in arm with a pretty girl, people who took trains and went somewhere else . . .

As for being a good father, no I don't believe I was. I never detested my children. When they were born, I said they were beautiful, to keep Mama happy, but in fact I thought they

looked ugly, and I haven't changed my mind much since. My daughter is thought intelligent because she never says anything, but I know that's because she has nothing to say. And she's pretentious, very proud of showing her little friends that she lives in a fine house.

I overheard a conversation once:

'What does your papa do?'

'He's a director of De Coster and Co.'

Quite false. You see what I mean? As for the boy, he has none of the faults of his age, which makes me think he'll never amount to much in his life.

If it is because I made up games for them that I'm considered a good father, well, that's wrong too, because I make up games for my own benefit when I'm bored in the evenings. I've always been bored. I built us a villa, not because I wanted to live in a villa, but because in my youth I envied friends who did.

I bought the same heating stove that I'd seen in the home of my wealthiest friend. And then a desk I'd seen elsewhere . . .

But this is straying from the point. In short, I was never someone from a good family, nor well brought up, nor a good husband, nor a good father, and if my wife is claiming that I was, that is simply because she needs to think that she's been a good wife and a good mother, and all that nonsense.

It was only three o'clock. He had time to think, which he did, peering casually through the warm atmosphere of the café which thickened as the daylight declined.

And I also read in your article that Basinger, my accountant at De Coster's, had declared:

'Monsieur Poppinga was so attached to the firm, which he considered a little as his own, that the news of the bankruptcy may have given him a terrible shock and disturbed his mind.'

I can assure you, my dear sir, that this kind of thing is painful to read. Imagine that someone told you that for the rest of your life you would have to eat nothing but black bread and sausage. Would you not try to convince yourself that black bread and sausage were excellent foods?

I convinced myself for sixteen years that the firm of Julius de Coster was the most solid and respectable in Holland.

Then one evening, at the Petit Saint-Georges café (you won't understand its significance, but that is of no matter) I learned that Julius de Coster was a crook, and many other truths of that kind.

Well, perhaps I was wrong to write 'crook'. In fact, Julius de Coster had always, without telling people, done what I would have liked to do. He had a mistress, the same Pamela who . . .

Now we're getting there. Just take note of this, that for the first time in my life, I looked at myself in the mirror and asked myself:

What reason in the world is there to carry on living like this?

Yes, indeed, what reason?

And perhaps you will ask yourself the same question, as will no doubt many of your readers. What reason? None at all. That is what I discovered when I simply thought, coolly and dispassionately, about things one always looks at from the wrong viewpoint.

In fact, there I was, senior signatory at the firm out of habit, husband of my wife out of habit, father of my children out of habit, because somebody or other had decided that's how things were and that they couldn't be any different.

But what if I did want to do something different?

You can't imagine how easy it all gets, once you have taken a decision like that. You have no need to worry about what So-and-so thinks, about what is legitimate or forbidden, respectable or not, right or wrong.

Normally, even if I was just going on a trip to another town, I had to pack my bags, and telephone ahead to book a hotel room.

But I just went calmly to the station and bought a ticket for Amsterdam, a ticket taking me away for good!

Then, since Julius de Coster had mentioned Pamela, and since for two years I had thought her the most desirable woman on earth, I went to pay her a visit.

It was quite simple. She asked me what I wanted. And I told her, straightforwardly just as I'm writing to you, without beating about the bush, and instead of finding that completely natural, she burst out laughing in a silly and insulting way.

Now I ask you, what difference could it make to her, since it was her trade! For me, the moment I decided to have Pamela, I just had to have her. I learned next day that I had tied the towel rather too tightly. I wonder, in fact, whether Pamela did not have a heart condition, since she gave up on life with disconcerting ease.

Well, there again, your reporter was wrong all along the line. What did he write? That I had fled from Groningen, acting like a madman. That my fellow-travellers had noticed that I was agitated. That the steward on the ferry had thought I was not looking normal.

But what nobody seems to understand is that it was 'before' all this that I was not in my normal state. 'Before', when I was thirsty, I didn't dare say so, or go into a café. If I happened to be hungry in someone else's house, and they offered me food, I would murmur politely:

'No thank you.'

If I was sitting in a train, I thought I should pretend to read or look out of the window and I kept my gloves on, because it seemed more respectable, although they were too tight.

Your reporter also writes:

'Here, the criminal made a mistake, which would lead to all the others. In his panic, he left his briefcase in the victim's bedroom.'

No, that is not true. It was not a mistake. I was not panicking. I'd brought the briefcase with me out of habit and I didn't need it any more. So I might as well leave it there as anywhere. When I learned that Pamela had actually died, I would in any case have written to the police to tell them that I had caused her death.

If you don't believe me, let me tell you that only yesterday, it was I who wrote to Chief Inspector Lucas by pneumatic express a letter informing him that I had attacked another woman, Jeanne Rozier.

The headline you printed is indeed flattering. You think I wanted to taunt the French police, but that isn't right either. I don't want to taunt anyone. Nor am I a maniac, and it wasn't out of perversity that I attacked Jeanne Rozier.

It's difficult to explain to you what happened, although it is rather similar to the affair with Pamela. For two days previously, I had had Jeanne Rozier available to me, but I wasn't tempted. Then when I was alone, I thought of her and I realized that she interested me. I went to her apartment to tell her so. And it was she who then refused me, without any reason.

Why did she do that? And why shouldn't I have used some force? I did so, but taking precautions, because Mademoiselle Rozier is a charming person and I wouldn't have wanted any harm to come to her. Any more than to Pamela. Pamela was an accident. It was my first time!

Are you now beginning to see why I am outraged at the articles that have been published about me today? I do not propose to write to all the papers, it would be too much trouble, but I wanted to make this statement public.

So, I am not mad, nor am I a sex maniac. Simply, at the age of forty, I have decided to live as I please, not worrying about conventions, or laws, because I have found out, rather late in the day, that nobody observes them and that, until now, I have been duped.

I have no idea what I will do next, or whether there will be any other incident which the police may take an interest in. It will depend on my desires.

In spite of what you may think, I'm an easy-going man. If tomorrow I were to meet a woman who was worth it, I would marry her and no more would be heard of me.

But if, on the other hand, I am driven into a corner and it pleases me to fight to the death, I think nothing would stop me.

I have spent forty years being bored. For forty years, I looked at life like some street urchin with his nose pressed up against the window of a cake shop, watching other people eating pastries.

Now I know that the pastries go to the people who take the trouble to grab them.

Carry on printing that I'm insane, if you like. By so doing, my dear sir, you will be proving that it is you who are insane – as I was before that evening in the Petit Saint-Georges.

I am not claiming any 'right of reply' as a reason for publishing this letter, since that would no doubt raise a smile. And yet anyone who smiled would be very foolish. For who, except a man whose life is at risk, could legitimately claim the right to correct errors which have been made about him?

So I will sign off, hoping to read my words in your columns, by saying that I remain your devoted (wrong word but it's the custom!)

Kees Poppinga

His wrist felt tired, but it was a long time since he had enjoyed himself so much. To the point that he couldn't bring himself to stop writing. The lamps had been lit. The station clock opposite was showing half past four. And the waiter seemed to think it was quite normal to see a customer whiling away time dealing with his correspondence.

Dear Sir,

This time he was writing to the paper which had carried the banner headline:

The Dutch Maniac

So he replied:

Your columnist no doubt thinks he is being extremely witty, and must be more accustomed to writing advertising slogans than serious newspaper articles.

In the first place, I cannot see what being Dutch has to do with this story, since I have read far more horrific stories in the newspapers where the perpetrators were a hundred per cent French nationals.

Secondly, it is all too easy to describe as maniacs people whom one cannot understand.

If this is the way you inform your readers, I am afraid I cannot congratulate you on your reporting.

Kees Poppinga

So that was two told!

For a moment he thought of returning to Boulevard Saint-Michel where he was sure to find someone to play chess with. But he had decided yesterday not to appear twice in the same place, and he wanted to keep to his resolution. And now a newspaper vendor was going round from table to table with the evening editions, so he bought them and began to read:

The arrest of Kees Poppinga, the Amsterdam sex killer, can only be a matter of hours, it is confidently expected. It will indeed be impossible for him to slip through the net which the energetic Chief Inspector Lucas has cast around him.

Our readers must forgive us for not giving more details, but they will understand our scruples, since it would be of assistance to the offender if we were to reveal the measures that have been taken.

We can say only this: that according to Mlle Jeanne Rozier, whose condition is now as satisfactory as can be expected, the Dutchman possesses only enough money to survive for a short while.

We can also say that he is easily recognizable by certain habits which he cannot discard – and that is the extent of what we are permitted to print.

Only one thing is to be feared: that Poppinga, knowing he is a wanted man, might proceed to launch another attack. Precautions have been taken.

As Chief Inspector Lucas told us, in his habitually unruffled manner, we are faced with a case which is fortunately rare in the annals of crime, but for which there are – notably in Germany and England – a certain number of precedents.

Maniacs of this kind, usually mentally defective, are lucid within their own deluded state, and may display a cold-blooded demeanour which can deceive, but which leads them to commit fatally imprudent errors.

We can suggest that if it is not hours, it is certainly only a matter of days. Several leads are currently being followed up. This morning at Gare de l'Est, following information received from a lady traveller, a person was arrested who corresponded to the description of Poppinga, but following identity checks by the special forces posted at the station, he turned out to be a respectable commercial traveller from the Strasbourg region.

There is one point which is complicating the investigation: Kees Poppinga speaks several languages fluently, which allows him to pass for an Englishman or a German as well as a Dutchman.

On the other hand, the testimony of Jeanne Rozier, who had not at first wished to press charges, has enabled the police to compose a valuable detailed description.

The public should therefore feel reassured to hear that Kees Poppinga will not get far.

Curiously, this article made him feel optimistic on the whole, and he went down to the washroom, simply to look at himself in the mirror.

He had not lost weight. He felt quite fit. For a moment, he had wondered whether to dye his hair and let his beard grow, then told himself that they

would be less likely to be looking for him with his normal appearance than wearing some kind of disguise.

The same was true of his grey suit, which was also as inconspicuous as possible.

But perhaps it would be better to find a dark blue overcoat, he thought.

And he paid his bill, posted his letters at the station, and made his way towards a gentlemen's outfitters which he had noticed that morning near Bastille.

'I'm looking for an overcoat. Navy blue.'

As he was saying this to a salesman on the first floor of this large store, he became aware of another danger, a new habit he had developed. He had got into the way of looking at people ironically. It was as if he were asking them:

'And what do you think, eh? Haven't you read the papers? Don't you realize you're serving the famous Poppinga, the Dutch Madman?'

He tried on several coats, which were almost all too small or too tight. He finally found one that more or less fitted, though it was of very poor quality.

'I'll keep this one on,' he decided.

'We can deliver your other overcoat, sir. To what address?'

'If you pack it up, I'll take it with me.'

Because details like this were the dangerous ones. Even walking in a new overcoat while carrying a parcel through the street! Fortunately, it was dark by now, the Seine was not far off, and he was able to get rid of the awkward package.

In spite of the idiotic things they had been writing about him, the journalists were useful in one way, since they gave him some clues about the way Chief Inspector Lucas's mind was working.

Unless . . . Unless, of course, Lucas had got them to print information with the sole aim of deceiving him!

It was amusing. They had never met, Kees and the chief inspector. They had never set eyes on each other. And they were like two players in a game of chess, each moving their pieces on the board without being able to see the other man's tactics.

What measures had they reported in the paper? Why did they seem to think he might attack someone else?

Pure provocation, he decided.

For heaven's sake! They thought he would react to any suggestion! They took him if not for a fool, then for someone whose mind was disturbed. They were driving him towards committing another crime, so that he would give himself away.

And what had Jeanne Rozier provided in the way of description?

That he was wearing grey, well, everyone knew that. That he smoked cigars. That he had no more than three thousand francs on him? And that he had not shaved.

So he was not anxious, not at all! But it was a little unnerving not to know what Chief Inspector Lucas was thinking. What instructions had he given his men? Where would they be looking? And how?

Perhaps Lucas had an idea that Poppinga would want to witness the arrest of the gang of car thieves, and would be hanging about within sight of the garage at Juvisy?

Not on your life!

Or that he would continue to frequent Montmartre?

That was no more likely!

So when and how did he think he would catch him?

Did he think Poppinga would try to escape, and was therefore having the railway stations watched?

In spite of himself, Poppinga began to turn round every now and then, and especially to stop in front of shop windows, to check that he was not being followed. Standing in front of a map by the Métro station, he wondered which neighbourhood he would choose for the night. Yes, which one, that was the question.

In at least one district of Paris, and possibly in two or three, the police would be checking up on cheap hotels and asking for the papers of all the guests.

But which district would Lucas choose? And why not avoid going to bed at all, since he was not sleepy? After all, he had noticed, the previous day on one of the major boulevards, a cinema which had films showing uninterruptedly until six in the morning.

Would Lucas think of looking for him in a cinema?

But come what may, he must take care about one thing: he must not look into people's faces, women's especially, with an ironic expression, and that air of saying:

'Don't you recognize me? Don't I frighten you?'

Because he was somehow searching for occasions to do so. As was proved by his having gone once more, without meaning to, into a restaurant where there were only waitresses serving.

‘*Take care about the way you look at people,*’ he noted in his book, stopping under a gas lamp.

One sentence was troubling him from the last article he had read. The one insisting that he would give himself away somehow.

How could they have guessed that there was a sort of dizziness inside him, that he found it hard to resign himself to being a face in the crowd, that he was dying to blurt out, especially if he met someone on a dark and lonely street:

‘Don’t you know who I am?’

But now that he was forewarned, there was no risk. He would make sure to look at people naturally, as if he was just a nobody, not the man all the papers were talking about.

And come to think of it, what was Julius de Coster making of all this? For he would surely have heard of it. There were articles in the English papers as well as the French ones.

Well, that gentleman, for one, would have to admit that he had been entirely mistaken about his employee. He must feel humiliated about the tone he had used when taking him into his confidence in the Petit Saint-Georges, talking to him as if he were an imbecile incapable of understanding anything.

And now the employee had gone one better than his boss, Popinga was more notorious than Julius. Who could deny it? Julius, whether in London, Hamburg or Berlin, was trying to create a business by the book, going through all the correct channels. While he, Popinga, was telling the world, crudely, exactly what he thought of it!

One of these days, just to see how De Coster would react, he would put an announcement in the *Morning Post*, as they had agreed. But how would he receive the reply?

Popinga was still walking. This had become half his life, wandering through the streets, across the light cast by shop windows, mingling with the crowd which jostled him without knowing who he was. And his hands, in the pockets of his overcoat, automatically caressed the toothbrush, shaving brush and razor.

He found the solution. He was always sure of finding solutions, just as he did at chess. He simply had to stay two nights in the same hotel, and write himself two letters in a made-up name. That would provide him with two envelopes addressed to himself, which would be enough to be able to withdraw mail from a poste restante.

And why not start tonight? He went once more into a brasserie. He didn't like traditional Paris cafés, the ones with small round-topped tables where customers had to sit too close to each other. He was used to bars in Holland, where there was less risk of being shoulder to shoulder with one's neighbours.

'Can you give me the telephone book?'

He opened it at random, and chanced on Rue Brey, a street he did not know, where he chose a hotel, the Beauséjour.

After which he wrote a letter to himself, or rather put a blank sheet inside an envelope and addressed it to:

Monsieur Smitson, Hôtel Beauséjour, 14, Rue Brey.

Why not kill two birds with one stone and do both envelopes now? He disguised his handwriting. Now he had a second envelope.

And why not use the pneumatic service?

Why not take advantage of it to the utmost, and ask for money from De Coster, who must be on tenterhooks, in case Kees might reveal his story?

He composed the notice:

Kees to Julius. Send five thousand, Smitson, poste restante, Bureau 42, Paris.

These small tasks kept him busy until eleven o'clock, since he was in no hurry, taking his time and enjoying writing in his careful readable hand.

'Waiter, some stamps!'

Then he went down to the telephone cabin, called the Hôtel Beauséjour, and began speaking at first in English, then switching to French with a strong English accent.

'Hello. This is Mr Smitson . . . I'll be arriving to take a room tomorrow morning. I'm expecting some mail, so can you please keep it for me?'

'Yes, sir.'

Had he outwitted Chief Inspector Lucas? Would he have been able to imagine Kees Poppinga to be such a cool customer?

'With bathroom, sir?'

'Yes, of course.'

In spite of which, he could not help feeling a pang, simply because the voice at the other end was that of a woman. He must avoid that at all costs. The evening paper had made it very clear: they were expecting him to make another attack on a woman, which would provide the police with more information.

But I won't attack anyone! he decided. And to prove it, I'm going calmly to the cinema. Tomorrow at six in the morning, I shall turn up at the Hôtel Beauséjour, as if I've just got off the night train.

Proving that he had thought of everything, in another café he asked for the railway timetable, and found that there was a train due in from Strasbourg at 5.32.

So, I'll be arriving from Strasbourg!

There. Job complete!

He could go to the cinema, and was all the more relieved to find that there were no usherettes, only some lanky youths in uniform showing patrons to their seats.

So what might Lucas do now? Or Louis, who would surely be back from Marseille? Or Goin? Or Rose, whom he detested without knowing why?



9.

The girl in blue satin and the young man with the crooked nose

Why couldn't the newspapers have given out more information? Normally, they tell you more than you want to know, reveal what the police are thinking about this and that, announce that the authorities have taken the following steps, and publish conspicuous photographs of those in charge of hunting the criminal.

Yet Poppinga had noticed that not a single paper had published a photo of Chief Inspector Lucas. Obviously, it was not of capital importance. The inspector would not be running round the streets in person like a junior officer searching for Kees, but he would still have liked to know what his adversary looked like, if only to form an opinion.

It was not so much the silence of the press that struck him as the instructions from on high that this silence must imply. For example, the paper which had published Poppinga's long letter had printed the following passage underneath it:

Chief Inspector Lucas, after reading this document with a smile on his face, gave it back to us and shrugged his shoulders.

'What do you think of it?' we asked him.

And the chief inspector vouchsafed only these words, unwilling to say more:

'It's in the bag!'

Which meant nothing at all to Poppinga, and was of no use to him. What interested him was whether, among other things, the prostitute whose name he didn't know, the one he had slept with in Faubourg Montmartre, and who had bought his razor for him, had recognized him in retrospect, and whether she had been to the police.

It was important, because if they discovered that he was carrying his shaving brush and razor around in his pocket, and if he kept on being unwilling to spend a night alone, he would quickly be spotted.

And yet sleeping alone was painful to him. He had done so at the Hôtel Beauséjour in Rue Brey, where he had collected the two letters that would enable him to claim mail at a poste restante in the name of Smitson.

He had slept alone the next night too, in a hotel in the Vaugirard district where he had almost got up in the middle of the night to go and find someone. It was an odd thing. If he had a woman alongside him, he dropped straight off to sleep, and would not wake till morning. Alone, by contrast, he started to think, at first comfortably, without much emotion, like a car setting out down a gentle slope, then faster and faster, and always of many things at once, unpleasant things, so that in the end he preferred to sit up and put the light on.

If he had told anyone this, they would have claimed he was feeling remorse, but that was not true. If proof were needed, he never thought about Pamela, who was dead, whereas he often saw in his mind's eye Jeanne Rozier, who had been injured, though not too seriously, and who would not have denounced him of her own accord. He also thought of Rose, whom he saw as hostile, although she had never done anything to him. Why, in all these fantasies, had she become his wicked fairy? And why did he keep dreaming that Jeanne Rozier, after looking at him for a long time with her green eyes, placed her lips with tender irony on his eyelids and her cool hand on his?

Was it better to spend restless nights than to risk being recognized by a woman he had picked up on the street? And could there not be a single journalist who would take enough pity on him – or be stupid enough – to write:

The police know such-and-such details about the wanted man. They are now keeping a watch on the following places . . .

Since he had sent his letters from various brasseries, including the pneumatic express to Chief Inspector Lucas, would they now be watching all the brasseries? Even if there was no police presence, it was still a dangerous environment, since café waiters are observant by profession; they also read the newspapers, and as they come and go, they have plenty of time to look closely at their customers.

Why couldn't the papers come right out with articles saying:

Just yesterday, five foreigners who were in cafés in central Paris and asked for writing materials were reported to the police and taken in for questioning.

Since there was no sign of that, Poppinga was reduced to taking ten times more precautions, and this evening, in particular, he was prey to a certain indecision.

It was because this was New Year's Eve. In most of the cafés, it was impossible to find a seat, because they were preparing the place for dinner, and the waiters were standing on tabletops, hanging up mistletoe and paper chains.

Poppinga remembered his first festive evening, Christmas Eve, a week earlier in the bar in Rue de Douai, where Jeanne Rozier had come to sit by him. And she had taken the trouble to meet him twice, despite being out with Louis and his friends! Then there had been the strange journey in a stolen car, his arrival at Juvisy, the snow covering the goods yard and all the trains, the engines blowing out steam, the sounds of railway trucks shunting.

And he kept walking. He had walked a great deal these last two days, for fear of the waiters in cafés, and when he did stop, he chose little bistros such as exist in every district, the kind where no one ever comes in, so that you wonder how they can survive.

He didn't have the heart to go to bed, and he wondered whether Chief Inspector Lucas was out celebrating. If he was, just where would such a man choose to go?

He felt a certain weariness! But that would pass once the holidays were over, when this exhausting atmosphere in Paris had subsided, when people were no longer haunted by the necessity of enjoying themselves at all costs.

For fear of being tempted to go and see whether the flower-seller was still on Rue de Douai, he had chosen tonight to go to the neighbourhood almost the furthest away, the Gobelins district, and found it one of the saddest in Paris, with its wide avenues that were neither ancient nor modern, where the houses were as monotonous as barracks, and the cafés thronged with people who were neither rich nor poor.

It was eventually in one of these places that he ended up, a brasserie on a street corner, where a placard announced: *New Year's Eve dinner: forty francs, champagne included.*

‘You’re alone?’ the waiter asked in surprise.

Not only was he alone, but he was almost the first person there, and had time to take in all the details, seeing the five musicians arriving one by one and chatting to each other as they tuned up, while the waiters were putting miniature sprigs of mistletoe in the place settings, and folding the napkins into fans, as they might at a small-town wedding.

Then customers began to arrive and it became more and more like a wedding breakfast, so much so that Popinga wondered whether it would not be more discreet of him to leave.

Everyone seemed to know everyone else, and people were pushing the tables together, so that the impression was of a banquet. The customers were all families, like those in the Saint-Paul cinema, local shopkeepers no doubt, well scrubbed, pomaded, in their Sunday best, the wives almost all in new dresses.

It took hardly a quarter of an hour for the café, which had felt icy-cold when Popinga had entered it, to become alive with conversations, laughter, music, the sound of knives and forks, the tinkle of glasses.

And the entire clientele seemed to be ready to enjoy themselves: that was what they had come for, and they all joined in the festive mood, especially older women, particularly if they were fat.

Kees ate his dinner like the others, without thinking too much. The atmosphere reminded him, heaven knew why, of the story of the sugar in the oxtail soup, at his friend’s celebration dinner party. Why did the papers expect him to do something like the attack on Pamela again?

He was sitting in a corner. Not far from him, a long table occupied by several families who knew each other was being presided over by a man who looked at ease, imposing, wearing a dinner-jacket a little too tight for him, with a watch chain and a moustache which seemed to have been waxed. From the conversation, Kees guessed that he must be a municipal councillor or something of the kind.

His wife was no less impressive, squeezed into a dress of black silk and bedecked with diamonds, real or false, like a shop window.

Then to the left of the father was their daughter, who looked like both her parents, but was nevertheless not unattractive. Perhaps one day she would resemble her mother, but for now she was fresh and rosy-cheeked in her blue satin dress; not yet what you might call plump, she was still healthily

buxom, and her bodice was so tight that you sensed she was having trouble breathing.

But what was all that to Popinga? He went on eating. He listened vaguely to the music and when, between courses, couples stood up to dance, he did not think for a moment that he might do the same, weaving between the tables.

And yet that was what happened, stupidly. He was looking at the girl in blue satin, while absently thinking about something else, at the very moment a waltz struck up, and no doubt she had taken his gaze for an invitation, since she made a slight gesture seeming to say:

‘Are you asking me?’

Then she stood up, smoothed down her dress and moved towards Popinga, who consequently found himself in the midst of the dancing couples. His partner had clammy hands, and gave off a rather bland odour, not unpleasant. She danced close up to him, crushing her chest against his, while her parents looked on approvingly.

Popinga, truth to tell, had still not got over the situation in which he now found himself. Seeing his reflection in the mirror, in this pose, he wondered whether it was really him and pulled a sardonic face. What would this shapely young woman have thought if she *knew* . . .

Then the band suddenly stopped playing, the drums beat out an ear-shattering roll, everyone started shouting, laughing and embracing each other, and Kees saw the soft face look up at him, before he received kisses on both cheeks.

It was midnight! People were milling around, laughing, threatening each other jovially, hugging strangers. Somewhat at a loss, Popinga, having received two kisses from the girl, received two more from the father and from another woman at their table, apparently a greengrocer.

Streamers were being thrown in all directions, as were little coloured cotton-wool balls that the waiters were hurriedly giving out. The band struck up another dance and without wanting to, Popinga found himself with the girl in his arms again.

‘Don’t look to the left,’ she whispered.

And as the dance gathered pace and became wilder, she told him:

‘I don’t know what he’s going to do! No! Take me over to the right of the room. I’m really afraid he’s going to make a scene . . .’

‘Who?’

‘Don’t look or he’ll know we’re talking about him! You’ll see him in a minute. A young man in a dinner-suit, on his own. Very dark, side parting. We were on the point of getting engaged, then I called it off, because I heard these things about him.’

No doubt the glasses of champagne she had drunk had put her in a mood to give away confidences, and it was true that the atmosphere was one of fraternity, bonhomie and openness. Everyone had embraced everyone else, after all. Now people were going round finding others in neglected corners, and leading women under the mistletoe to give them kisses on the cheek, with cries of happiness.

‘I’m telling you this, just to warn you.’

‘Er, yes,’ he said, without conviction.

‘Perhaps it would be best if you didn’t ask me to dance again. The way he is, I know he’s capable of anything. He told me I’ll never be anyone else’s fiancée.’

Luckily, the dance was over and the girl returned to her seat, while her mother sent a discreet and grateful smile at Popinga, as if he had just done the whole family a favour.

Kees, back in his corner, looked around for the young man who had been mentioned, and quickly recognized him, since he was the only one corresponding to the description, with a side parting that accentuated the irregularity of his features, further emphasized by a very crooked nose.

The young man was furious, there was no need to look at him for long to realize that! He was livid. He had fixed on the girl in blue satin a gaze of terrible intensity, and his lips were trembling.

Why did all this look to Popinga like a daub by a Sunday painter, the colours all too crude, the people depicted with every hair in place? Everything stood out in sharp and unexpected relief, and the five musicians seemed to have filled the café with a sound like the wrath of God. Everyone was screaming hysterically with laughter, over nothing, over a streamer or a cotton-wool ball hitting a man on the neck or in the face; all the customers were looking thoroughly pleased with themselves, almost inhumanly so, except for the young man with the crooked nose, who seemed to be playing the role of the villain in a melodrama.

In fact, Popinga had been wrong not to drink sparkling wine like everyone else. He might then have been in the right mood and it would have

been fun to celebrate the New Year in such a vulgar and emotional family atmosphere.

From time to time, the girl shot him a complicit glance, as if to say:

‘You’re doing the right thing. Better not ask me again. You can see for yourself how threatening he is.’

Who could this boy be? A bank clerk? Or rather a sales assistant in a department store, judging by his rather studied elegance. A passionate young man, at any rate, who was playing out a whole novel for himself, a tragedy, and who had chosen as his partner the blonde daughter of the municipal councillor.

The father danced with his wife, then with his daughter, then with all the ladies at his table, bobbing about, playing the fool, amusing onlookers, wearing a cardboard fireman’s helmet on his head.

Party hats had been given out and Popinga had received a naval officer’s cap, with a lot of white on it, which he took care not to put on.

Twice, the girl’s mother turned to him with a flirtatious smile that meant:

‘Not dancing any more?’

And she had surely said to her husband:

‘He looks like a really respectable gentleman.’

But meanwhile a different young man had emerged from some corner, where Popinga had not seen him, and was dancing with the blue satin dress. And suddenly, Kees realized that the danger was not imaginary, that the expression of the lover with the crooked nose was becoming tragic.

A number of times during the dance, he made as if to stand up, and Popinga did not like the way his right hand kept going to his pocket.

‘Waiter!’ he called.

‘Yes, sir, what . . .?’

He had an intuition. He felt something was about to happen, and he wanted to leave as fast as possible. Everyone else was enjoying themselves without any suspicion, but to him it was as though the young man with the crooked nose had already caused a scandal.

‘Waiter, I said!’

‘Yes, sir. Going already? But it isn’t one o’clock yet!’

‘What do I owe you?’

‘As you wish, sir. As I was saying . . . Forty, plus eight, plus seven, that’s fifty-five francs.’

Popinga's intuition was verging on panic. It seemed to him it would be dangerous to lose a second, and he was impatient as he waited to collect his overcoat from the cloakroom, still looking back at the angry young man, who could hardly contain himself, while the girl in blue was still dancing and now and then smiling vaguely over at Kees.

'Thank you.'

He dashed out so quickly that he almost knocked over a table.

The councillor's wife looked at him with mute reproach.

'Already!' she appeared to be saying. 'And you never even asked me to dance!'

He reached the revolving door. He was still holding his hat in his hand, and he had stepped into the first division of the door . . .

. . . when the shot rang out, above the music, followed by a stupefied silence. Kees almost turned round, but he realized that he must resist that temptation at all costs. He understood that he was in danger and had barely time to escape from this bourgeois family café, where a lover's quarrel had just turned into a drama.

He went left, then right, taking streets he did not know, walking quickly and wondering whether the girl in blue satin was dead, and what effect it would have to see her lying on the floor, like a big doll, in the middle of all the paper streamers and cotton-wool balls.

He was already some distance away when he saw a van full of policemen speeding in the direction of the Gobelins, and he did not stop walking until a quarter of an hour later, when he suddenly realized he had reached Boulevard Saint-Michel, and on the left was the café where he had played the Japanese student at chess.

It was only after the event that he registered the shock. He realized the danger he had been in. He mopped his brow and felt his knees tremble.

How stupid would it have been – when he was waging a battle of wits, scientifically, so to speak, against Chief Inspector Lucas and against the whole world, including the journalists – to get caught, just because some jealous young man had pulled a gun!

From now on, he must be wary of crowds, because in a crowd there is always something happening, a drama, an accident, and then everyone's papers get checked.

And he shouldn't stay on Boulevard Saint-Michel either, since it seemed to him, rightly or wrongly, that this was one of the places where they might

be looking for him. Or Montmartre! Or Montparnasse! It would be better to go back to a district like the Gobelins, find a quiet hotel and go to sleep.

And did he not have work to do? He had not brought his notebook up to date for a whole day. It was true that, apart from the gunshot in the café, there was not a great deal to report.

But he had taken another decision. Since something might happen to him, and since the notebook would not be enough, because nobody would understand, he had promised himself, now that he had the time, to start writing his true memoirs.

What had given him the idea was the newspaper which had published his letter the day before under the headline:

The strange confessions of a killer

Then under the article, an added paragraph:

As our readers can see, we have been able to offer them a human document of great value, very few of which exist in the archives of crime.

Is Kees Poppinga sincere? Or is he playing a role? Indeed, is he even deceiving himself? And at all events, is he mad or sane, which is something we are not competent to judge.

That is why we have shown his letter to two of our most eminent psychiatrists, and we hope from tomorrow to be able to print their reactions, in the firm conviction that we will thus be providing precious assistance to the police.

He had read and re-read his letter, and had felt dissatisfied. His words and phrases did not have the same effect when printed in the newspaper as they had on the writing paper in the brasserie. Many things were imperfectly explained and others not at all. To the point that the paper had brought in two psychiatrists, and asked them to wait a little before making any judgement!

What he had said about his father, for instance, might incline people to think there was some family history of alcoholism, whereas his father had not actually started to drink seriously until several years after his son's birth.

Nor had he explained properly that while he had been a loner since his schooldays, that was because he had felt he would not be granted the place in society to which he had a right.

He would have to start again, from the beginning, that is from his birth. He would have to say that he could have come first in everything, which was the truth. Because as a child he had been excellent at all games. When he saw someone doing a gymnastic exercise he would say:

‘That’s nothing.’

And without any preparation, improvising, he could do it at the first attempt.

As for his family life, that was where people would really get the wrong idea. He had not been able to explain how it actually was.

For instance, he would be accused of never having loved his wife and children, which was completely false.

He liked them *well enough*, that was the truth of it. In other words, he did everything expected of him, he had indeed been what people would describe as a good father, and no one could reproach him with anything on that score.

Basically, he had always done his best. He had made a great effort to be normal, like everyone else, a respectable, well-behaved, honourable man, and he hadn’t stinted his time or effort.

His children had been well fed, well clothed, well housed.

They each had a bedroom in the villa, and their own bathroom, which was not the case for all families. He was not stingy over household expenses. And therefore . . .

Still, it was possible to do all that and end up alone in a corner with the confused feeling that it was not enough to fill a life, and that one might perhaps have been able to achieve something else!

That was what he wanted to convey to others. In the evenings, when Frida – how strange now to pronounce her name! – when Frida was doing her homework and Mama was sticking pictures in her album, and when he, Kees, was twiddling the knobs on the wireless set and smoking his cigar, he could not help feeling isolated.

When, for example, he heard the whistle of a train, less than thirty metres from the house . . .

For now, he went on walking, through streets sometimes too brightly lit, sometimes dark. He met from time to time groups of merry-makers who were linking arms and, like the municipal councillor, wearing paper hats.

He also came across other men, walking slowly, picking up cigarette ends from the pavements, stopping in front of cafés, and vaguely hoping for something. He went past uniformed policemen who were spending the festive evening standing on street corners, keeping an eye on the city, without any enthusiasm.

As was obvious, since none of them thought of looking at him closely!

He would write his memoirs, and in fact he had already tried to make a start that morning, but had been unable to do so because he was alone in a hotel bedroom.

And when he was alone, his ideas all vanished, or rather his thoughts all turned in a different direction, and he felt like looking in the mirror, to see whether his face had changed.

He preferred to write in a large café, where the essence of other people's lives could be breathed in, like the warm smell from a coal-burning stove. Only now, he couldn't ask for writing materials, for fear of seeing the waiter frown and go to the telephone to call the police.

But what *could* he do, in fact? He didn't know, because Chief Inspector Lucas had not told the press what *he* was doing, or else had managed to make the papers maintain a news blackout on it.

He certainly could not take a train. That was elementary! There couldn't be a single railway station without a policeman scrutinizing the passengers and armed with Poppinga's description.

Prostitutes? He couldn't be sure of them. It was worth a try, but very risky. On the other hand, if he slept alone again, he knew he would have a bad night, which would be unhelpful next day, since he would wake up feeling listless and without his usual lucidity.

What he really needed was a woman like Jeanne Rozier, who could have understood and helped him, since she was intelligent enough for that. And indeed he was sure that she had felt it too, that she had guessed he was a different kind of man from her pimp Louis, a man good for nothing but stealing cars and selling them in the provinces, which is a very basic kind of crime. As Poppinga had proved by being able to join in, at his first attempt, without batting an eyelid!

Were the police watching the garage in Juvisy as he had suggested to them? Who knows? He had not sent that message by chance. Once Louis was under lock and key, where he would no doubt remain for some years, with Goin and the others, Jeanne Rozier would be alone and then . . .

Meanwhile, he needed somewhere to sleep, and the problem was becoming urgent, since it recurred every night with all the risks it carried. Kees was not sure quite where he was now. He had to look at the names of two streets and find a Métro station to see that he was on Boulevard Pasteur, in an unfamiliar district which seemed just as uninteresting as the Gobelins.

Some windows were still lit. People who had been spending the evening with friends were now emerging from doorways, looking for taxis. One such couple were having words, and he heard the woman say:

‘Just because it’s New Year’s Eve, you didn’t have to keep asking her to dance!’

What a strange life! And a strange night. An old man was fast asleep, stretched out full-length on a bench, and two policemen were walking along in step, chatting about their trivial affairs, their pay no doubt.

It was really hard to resign himself to sleeping alone, not to mention . . . How stupid! At the time he hadn’t noticed. Still, the plump girl in blue satin, whom he had held in his arms, annoyed him in retrospect. And anyway, he had grown accustomed to the squalor and sordid intimacy, night after night, with an unknown woman in his bed . . .

So why not try it once again? It was true that tonight there were very few women alone on the streets. Even near the hotels, where they usually took up position, he couldn’t see any. Perhaps they too were out celebrating New Year?

He walked on again. From a distance, he saw Gare Montparnasse, and avoided going too near it, since he was sure that was a dangerous place.

Half an hour later, he had still not found anyone. Feeling morose, his legs tired, he went into a hotel, hoping that perhaps there would be a chambermaid to greet him. But it was an elderly night watchman who received him, in as bad a temper as he was himself, and who, since Poppinga had no luggage, made him pay in advance and gave him a key.

On top of everything else, Poppinga’s watch had stopped and he had no idea at what time he finally dropped off to sleep nor when he woke up, since he was in a room looking on to a courtyard and could not judge by the activity in the street.

He only realized once he was outside that it was very early, that the city was empty and desolate, as always after a holiday. There was nobody about, except for people alighting in the stations from the suburbs, wearing their best clothes, on their way to visit relations with New Year wishes. As the sky was grey and an icy breeze was scouring the streets, it could have been All Saints’ Day in November just as well as New Year.

At least he would discover in the paper he had bought what the two psychiatrists thought about him, and he opened it as he walked along a street leading to the École Militaire.

Professor Abram, who was willing to talk to us last night despite the public holiday, had only been able to read quickly through Kees Poppinga's letter, preparatory to studying it at greater length. He summed up his first impressions in a single word. In his view the Dutchman is a paranoiac, and if his pride were to be seriously wounded, he could become very dangerous, especially since people of this kind maintain a cool and calculating demeanour, whatever the circumstances.

Professor Linze, who is away from Paris for the next two days, will give us his opinion on his return.

At police headquarters, there is no immediate news. Chief Inspector Lucas was taken up for the whole of yesterday with a drug-trafficking affair which left him little free time, but his colleagues are pursuing the Poppinga case. From what we could gather through our inquiries, there is a new element, but at Quai des Orfèvres, total discretion is being observed.

All we can say is that Poppinga is unlikely to remain at large for much longer.

Why was that? He was talking to himself. Yes, why shouldn't he remain at large for much longer? And why wouldn't they give any details? And why were they treating him as a paranoiac?

He had heard the word before, certainly. And he vaguely suspected what it meant. But couldn't they have explained it a bit? If only he could have consulted a dictionary! But where? In Groningen, if you went into a public library, you had to sign a register. It would no doubt be the same in Paris. And the cafés, although they usually had a phone book and a railway timetable, wouldn't be in the habit of making dictionaries available to their customers.

How infuriating this was! It was starting to look like a conspiracy, an act of gratuitous cruelty, like that allusion to some 'new element' which they refused to divulge.

Hadn't Jeanne Rozier, who knew her way around police headquarters, said that Lucas was 'a mean beast'? Poppinga once more had the feeling that the inspector was doing nothing, was not bothering to search for him, expecting that his victim would give himself away somehow.

Wasn't that the impression one got of his approach, as described in the press, and from the few ambiguous sentences he had deigned to utter?

Well, he was wrong, because Poppinga was not at all ready to walk naively into a trap. He was at least as intelligent as this gentleman, or that other man, the psychiatrist, who had just said one word in a scornful tone: 'Paranoiac.'

Like other people had said 'madman'. Or 'sex maniac'. Or like that woman in Faubourg Montmartre who had said he was 'a sad case'. Or the

skinny girl in Rue de Birague, who had declared that he ‘must prefer fatter girls’.

Was he not superior to all these people, in that at least he knew himself?

He re-read the article – it seemed insultingly short – as he drank a coffee and ate a croissant in a little bar with walls tiled in 1900 style. Then he remembered the girl in blue satin and looked through the paper until he found a few lines in the section on minor incidents.

Last night during New Year festivities, in a café near the Gobelins, a jealous lover, Jean R—, fired a revolver at Germaine H—, the daughter of a wine merchant who is also one of our most popular municipal councillors. Fortunately the bullet only slightly injured another dancer, Germain V—, who was allowed home after hospital treatment. Jean R— meanwhile has been taken into custody.

He laughed to himself, without knowing why. It was hilarious wasn’t it, this family drama ending with a gunshot – or rather perhaps with a wedding. Since Poppinga was not sure that ‘Germaine H—’ had not set it all up on purpose.

The next thing was to find out whether Julius de Coster the Younger had replied to his notice, that is if he had not forgotten to read the *Morning Post* every day. Poppinga took the bus, since he had to cross Paris to reach Bureau 42, Rue de Berri. He marched up to the counter for poste restante and showed his two envelopes addressed to M. Smitson.

Without making any difficulty, the clerk went to look under ‘S’ and passed him an envelope with a typewritten address.

He retreated into a corner to open it. It felt thick. He brought out four one-pound notes, then a sheet of paper with a few lines, also typed:

Sorry I can’t send you any more, but the beginning is always the hardest bit and this is all I had on me. Keep me posted and if necessary I’ll try my best.
J.

And that was all! It was as if Julius de Coster was not even astonished at what Poppinga had been up to. It was as if nobody was the slightest bit surprised, and the only word they could find to describe him meant nothing: *Paranoiac*.

It was true that Mama had come up with another word: *amnesia*.



10.

In which Kees Poppinga changes his shirt, while the police and chance, failing to play by the rules, combine in a conspiracy of spitefulness

He was not discouraged, no. That would have been too pleasing to those gentlemen. But he could not help, when he bought a newspaper, or saw the billboards outside the kiosks, giving a bitter smile.

Nobody realized what he was up against, alone, facing everyone else, bravely playing the game, nor did they take account of the fact that certain details of everyday life made things very complicated for someone in his shoes.

So the first time he changed his shirt – in the washroom of a café, a place that held an important position in his wandering life – he had come out of the lavatory with the dirty shirt in one hand, and had then dropped it into an outdoor urinal on the street.

And then what had happened? – he had almost been caught! A policeman had seen the garment fall and, as Kees was walking away, had gone inside the street convenience, so that Kees had had to take to his heels!

Now that, for the second time, he was putting on a clean shirt, he preferred to throw the old one into the Seine, but it was more complicated than one might think to find somewhere to carry out this task without being seen. Always, at the last moment, he would glimpse an angler, a tramp, a pair of lovers, or a lady walking her dog.

And who would ever suspect these difficulties of everyday life? Not the newspapers, at any rate! He had provided them not only with a topic, but with plenty of free copy. And in spite of that, none of them had expressed the slightest sympathy towards him.

He was not asking that people should publicly take his side. Nor for two columns on the front page every day. But he knew what he meant. There is a way of presenting events of this kind so as to render the hero of them appealing or repellent. And in France, individuals caught up in mysteries or crimes are almost always presented with some sympathy.

So why was it different for him? Was this some plan on the part of Chief Inspector Lucas?

He had not stolen anything from anyone – that ought to reassure the bourgeoisie. And if Pamela was dead, well, he had not meant to kill her. And both times, he had attacked only women of a certain background, which should be enough to dispel any fears on the part of respectable wives.

Landru, the serial killer, who was ugly to boot, had had half the newspaper-reading public on his side!

Why? And why was there this unacknowledged hostility from the press – that is, when it was not blanking out any new developments, merely printing uninteresting pieces of information such as:

Dr Linze, whose opinion on the Dutchman's case we had hoped to report, has informed us that despite his wish to help, he does not feel qualified, simply on the basis of a single letter, to advance a diagnosis concerning such a serious affair.

And this was what it had come to! Trivial disputes, marginal to his life, or to his freedom. The very next day, Professor Abram, feeling that he was the target of this comment by his colleague, wrote pompously to the paper to protest:

Words have been placed in my mouth about an affair which is in any case of little importance. It is true that in the course of conversation, I may have indicated that I considered Kees Poppinga to be a paranoiac of the banal kind, but at no time was I putting forward this off-the-cuff opinion as a diagnosis.

So even the psychiatrists seemed to be losing interest in him! Even Saladin, the journalist who had written the best articles about him at first, was now simply publishing press releases without comment. Kees did not know the man. He had no idea whether he was young or old, cheerful or gloomy, and yet the journalist's silence gave him a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach.

What interest could there be in printing paragraphs of this kind, dry as dust:

The experts who have studied the accounts of the firm of Julius de Coster, working over the Christmas holiday, have made a preliminary report, declaring that their inquiries will require several more weeks. It seems indeed that this affair is much more considerable than first appeared, not only because of a spectacular bankruptcy, but because of a string of embezzlements committed under cover of an honourable façade.

In another development, the Wilhelmine Canal has been dragged for the last few days. The body of Julius de Coster has not been found, and it does not seem possible that he was carried away by a boat.

The prevailing opinion is that this is a case of fake suicide, and that the businessman has escaped abroad.

But what was that to Poppinga? Then, on the other hand, they seemed to delight in publishing brief reports like the following:

Chief Inspector Lucas went to Lyon yesterday, admitting that this was in connection with an investigation, but refusing to say whether it was the Poppinga case, or whether on the contrary this concerned drug traffickers, several of whom are already in custody.

Why Lyon? And why did they keep harping on about some drug-dealing that was of no interest to anyone? Why did it seem as if a hidden mastermind was taking care to lay false trails?

The mastermind could only be Chief Inspector Lucas. It must be he who, one way or another, was preventing the journalists from doing the investigative reporting they usually carried out.

Because as a rule, every newspaper would pursue its own little inquiry, they would each have their theory, some kind of lead, they would ask questions and inform their readers of what they had learned.

But as of now, nobody had thought of interviewing Jeanne Rozier. There wasn't a word about her state of health! It was impossible to find out whether she had recovered, and whether she was back working at Picratt's. Nor was there anything about Louis, no report of his trip to Marseille or his return.

Didn't it seem as though they were pursuing a petty vendetta? And how credible was it that *nobody* had gone to the police to declare they had met Poppinga! Because if they had, why was it being kept quiet?

In order to drive him into a corner, that must be it. He knew what they were up to! He shrugged and sighed scornfully, feeling that they wanted to isolate him in a kind of vacuum.

All the same, he took care over his behaviour. When he was walking in the street, he avoided looking at passers-by with a quizzical or ironic air. He avoided prostitutes, preferring to sleep badly or stay awake half the night, sometimes suffering from palpitations.

He had just had a new experience. Chance had taken him to the Javel neighbourhood, and to a very down-at-heel hotel. He had thought it would be wise to change the type of place he stayed in. That was a mistake. He was wearing the wrong kind of clothes to be staying the night in one of these poor doss-houses, and he had noticed that the people there had stared at him in surprise.

So, keep away from the extremes, aim not too high, and not too low. And now he had just twelve hundred francs left and sometime soon, he would have to get hold of some more money. He was starting to think about that. There was still time, but it was best to have a plan in mind.

The night at Javel had been that of 7 to 8 January, and Poppinga, after throwing his latest used shirt into the Seine, decided to change district before reading the papers. It was raining. For other people, a minor inconvenience. For him, since he had to spend much of the day walking the streets and had no spare clothes, it assumed great importance, and it was as if nature had joined the conspiracy of spite against him.

Still, if spite was to be his lot!

It was near the Madeleine, in a comfortable brasserie, that he almost burst out into angry laughter as he read, in the newspaper where Saladin was a reporter:

Police release car thief.

The worst of it was that for some days now, he had been expecting something of the kind. He had not been wrong in thinking there was a catch in all this somewhere. As for imagining . . .

. . . Yesterday at five p.m. we happened to be present outside the Police Judiciaire when one of the car thieves arrested last week was released.

As this man, known as Louis, emerged from Chief Inspector Lucas's office, we tried to obtain some information from an official source, but we met a wall of resolute silence.

We can therefore only communicate the results of our personal inquiries and put forward some suggestions.

First of all, no press release was issued when, on the night of 1 to 2 January, Chief Inspector Lucas, who normally does not handle this kind of case, supervised in person the arrest of a gang of car thieves.

Why was it kept so quiet? And why, since then, has nothing been heard about this affair, when four men and one woman have been held in custody?

We believe we can answer these questions, because we know the identity of the leader of the so-called 'Juvisy gang' – it was in that suburb that stolen cars were disguised overnight before being sold off in the provinces.

And the leader of the gang is none other than this same Louis, a former drug dealer, and the lover of Jeanne Rozier.

We have not forgotten that she . . .

Kees Poppinga could have written the rest of the article himself, better than his friend Saladin. Never had his smile held so much scorn for the newspapers, for Lucas and indeed the whole human race.

Now we can see why Chief Inspector Lucas intervened personally in the Juvisy affair. The gang was all arrested, including a certain Rose, former chambermaid in a house of ill repute and sister of the garage-owner Charlie Goin, and all these individuals were being held for prolonged questioning without the press being kept informed.

If Louis has now been released, are we to believe that this is because he has established his innocence? We do not think so. And we confess that, for want of any official word from Quai des Orfèvres, we have proceeded to question a number of persons in the milieu who are acquainted with Louis and this kind of affair.

If Louis has been released, they told us, that's because he's going to do someone a favour, mark our words.

As if to confirm this opinion, last night Louis was observed calling in at several bars in Paris and issuing mysterious instructions to his friends.

Let us simply say, not to anticipate too far, that it appears that Kees Poppinga, the attacker of Jeanne Rozier, is being hunted not only by the police, but by the entire criminal underworld, which has turned against him.

Which can only mean, we think, that an arrest is imminent. Unless by some accident . . .

This time, looking at himself in the mirror across the room, Poppinga became aware that his face was pale and his lips unable to shape a smile, even a sarcastic one.

Events had confirmed his fears, and without Saladin, whom he now disliked much less, he would not have known a thing! He would have continued to come and go, without suspecting the web being woven round him.

It was after all very simple! The Juvisy stakeout had been successful and the gang had been arrested, but Lucas, instead of proclaiming this from the rooftops, had fobbed the press off with references to morphine and heroin.

He must have shown Louis the letter Poppinga had written, denouncing everyone. And he had not hesitated, it was now clear, to offer him a shameful deal.

Yes, that was what had happened. The police were doing deals with Louis. They had let him go, in order that he could finish Poppinga off. In other words, the police had been unable to catch him unaided!

And now Kees was filled not only with scorn, and bitterness, but a deep and profound disgust. He asked for some paper, took out his fountain-pen, but as he prepared to write, he shrugged his shoulders with weariness. Who could he write to? Saladin? Just to confirm what he said in his article? To

Lucas, to congratulate him ironically? To whom, then? And what was the use?

Because Louis had joined the chase, they now thought it was all but over and were boasting of victory. What would happen? All the streetwalkers in Paris, all the tramps, all the proprietors of suspect bars and shoddy hotels would have their eyes open and would be ready and waiting to alert the police.

The police might not ever have clapped eyes on Kees, but Louis knew very well what he looked like.

‘Waiter! My bill, please.’

He paid for his drink, but did not leave his table. He did not quite know why. He suddenly felt all the accumulated fatigue of his hours of walking through Paris. He stayed sitting on the long moleskin seat, vaguely looking out at the streets where umbrellas were bobbing past.

The truth was that a car thief, a convicted criminal, who lived on the proceeds of prostitution, was being given preference over him. Because that was the long and short of it. Nobody could deny it. And no doubt if Louis was successful, the authorities would close their eyes to the doings of the Juvisy gang!

‘Waiter!’

He was thirsty. Too bad. He needed to think, and a glass of something alcoholic would help.

Basically, after the incident with Jeanne Rozier, he had been wrong to stop. Oh, he was clear-headed about it. He was beginning to understand the way public opinion operated. It would have been better if next day they had been able to read in the papers:

Killer strikes again! Kees Poppinga attacks a young woman in a train . . .

And so on, something new every day, to keep the public breathless with interest and to become a legend.

Would anyone have cared a fig about Landru’s fate if he had killed only one or two women?

And perhaps he had been wrong to write what he really thought, instead of lying. What if, for instance, he had led them to believe that in Groningen, where he had passed for a model citizen, he had already been carrying out secret attacks?

He re-read Saladin's article, which confirmed him in his view: the central focus of this story was no longer Poppinga; it was already Louis who was becoming the leading character.

By tomorrow, Jeanne's lover would have been transformed into a folk hero. The public would become enthralled in this manhunt through the Paris underworld, led by a common criminal with the tacit consent of the police!

Discouraged, no, he did not want to admit to that, and he would not allow himself at any price to lose heart. He had a perfect right to feel tired and to react to the injustice of which he was the victim. How many people were after him now? Hundreds? Thousands?

Which did not prevent him drinking his glass of brandy and gazing out dispassionately at the rain falling. Let them look! Let them scrutinize every passer-by. A man alone is always stronger than the crowd, if he can only maintain a cool head. And Poppinga would keep his.

He had been wrong in one respect: he ought to have considered everyone his enemy right from the start. Since he had not done so, nobody had taken him seriously. They had not been frightened of him. They had regarded him almost as a grotesque figure of fun.

A paranoiac!

Well, so what? Did that prove anything? Did it stop him taunting the whole of Paris, as he sat in the warmth of a brasserie in front of his second brandy? Would that prevent him doing what he wanted to, something he would decide on, this very day, something enormous, something that would make them all quake in their shoes, the lot of them, including the car thieves, the good-time girls and Louis' thugs.

He didn't yet know what. There was still time. Better not to rush into it, wait for inspiration and go on watching the people walk past in the street like a stupid flock of sheep. Some of them were even running, as if that would do them any good. And over there was a gendarme in his cape, serious as a judge and thinking himself indispensable, wielding his whistle and his white baton. Wouldn't it be more intelligent of him, instead of parading around like that, to come and check Poppinga's identity papers?

If he had, it would all have been over. No more Poppinga affair, no need of Louis or anyone else, or of Chief Inspector Lucas, who must be thinking he was the most subtle of men.

Proof that he wasn't as subtle as all that, was that Kees, without access to any information, had for several days sensed this blow coming, and had had

the courage to sleep alone.

Who knows? Perhaps from now on, he would no longer sleep alone. But in any case, his companions would not be able to tell the tale . . .

His head was throbbing. He looked at himself in the mirror once more and wondered if he had really thought what he had just thought. Why not? What was stopping him?

He turned his head, since someone had spoken to him in English, a man who had been sitting at the next table for a few minutes, writing.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ he said with a smile, ‘do you by any chance speak English?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you perhaps English yourself?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘In that case, may I ask for a favour? I’ve just arrived in Paris from America. I want to ask the waiter how many stamps I need to post this letter, but he doesn’t understand me.’

Popinga called the waiter over, translated, and looked at his companion, who was effusive in his thanks as he stuck stamps on a letter for New Orleans. ‘You’re so lucky to speak French,’ the stranger sighed, folding the blotter. ‘I’ve been really miserable since I got here. People don’t understand me when I ask my way on the street. You know Paris?’

‘A little, yes.’

It amused him to think that in a week, he had had time to explore every quarter of Paris.

‘Some friends have given me a tip, about a bar run by an American, where all the Americans in Paris can meet. Do you know it?’

The man was no longer young. He had grey hair, broken blood vessels in his cheeks and a cherry nose which revealed his liking for strong liquor.

‘Apparently it’s somewhere near the Opera, but I’ve been looking for half an hour without finding it.’

He took a scrap of paper from a pocket of his large overcoat.

‘It’s in Rue . . . wait a minute . . . Rue de la Michodière . . .’

‘Yes, I know the street.’

‘Is it far from here?’

‘Five minutes on foot.’

The other man paused, then said hesitantly:

‘Would you be willing to accompany me there for an aperitif? I haven’t spoken to anyone for two days.’

And what about Popinga? It was a week since he had spoken to anyone.

Five minutes later, the two men were walking along the boulevard, and a street hawker, hearing them speak English, offered them some ‘special’ postcards.

‘What are those?’ the American asked.

And Kees blushed as he replied:

‘Oh nothing, just some stuff they try to sell tourists.’

‘Have you lived in Paris long?’

‘Quite a while, yes.’

‘I’m only here for a week, before moving on to Italy, then I’m going back home to New Orleans. Do you know it?’

‘No.’

People turned round to look at them. They were typical foreigners, strolling along the boulevards with an air of confidence, talking loudly, as if no one could understand them.

‘Here’s the street,’ Popinga said.

He was cautious enough to think he should say nothing too compromising to this man. If by chance he was connected to the police, or to Louis’s gang, there would be a heavy price to pay.

He pushed open the door of an unfamiliar bar, and was at once impressed by the décor and the atmosphere.

...

This was something quite new for him. It wasn’t France, it was the United States. Around a high mahogany counter, a number of tall and burly men were talking in loud voices, drinking and smoking, while two barmen, one of them Chinese, were busy serving whiskies and huge glasses of beer. On the mirrors, writing in white chalk listed the beverages.

‘A whisky for you?’

‘Yes, please!’

For Popinga, it was a change from the French brasseries of the last few days, which he was getting to know by heart, with their nickel bowls on cast-iron stands for rinsing out cloths, their little bookcases holding the telephone directories, their cashiers perched on high chairs, their waiters in white aprons.

Here, the bar made him think of something else, a long sea-voyage, landing at some faraway port. Kees listened and realized that most of the customers were discussing that afternoon's races, while the largest man, who had four chins and a brown check overcoat, like French caricatures of Americans, was taking bets.

'Are you in business too?' his new friend asked him.

'Yes . . . I'm in wholesale grains.'

He was saying this because he knew something about grains, which had been part of the concern of the De Coster firm.

'I'm in leather. Would you like some sausages? Yes, you really should. I'm sure the sausages are excellent here, because this is America and American sausages are the best in the world.'

People were coming and going. Thick cigarette smoke surrounded the bar and the walls were decorated with photographs of American sportsmen, mostly with dedications to the café owner.

'Say, it's swell here, isn't it? The friend who told me about it said it was the friendliest place in Paris. Two whiskies, barman.'

Then straight away with a moist-lipped smile:

'Is it true that French women are friendly to foreigners? I haven't had time to go and sample the nightlife in Montmartre, I must confess it scares me a bit.'

'What's there to be scared of?'

'Well, back home, they say that there are plenty of crooks up there, more cunning than our gangsters, and that foreigners are often robbed. You haven't been robbed, have you?'

'No, never. And I've often been to Montmartre.'

'And you've been with women?'

'Yes.'

'And they didn't have an accomplice hiding in the bedroom?'

This helped Poppinga to forget for a while the treacherous behaviour of Chief Inspector Lucas. Here, he was the experienced person, the one who could advise a beginner. The more he looked at his companion, the more naive he found him, more naive even than a Dutchman.

'Their pimps aren't in the bedroom, they wait for them outside.'

'What for?'

'No reason. They're just waiting. You don't need to be scared.'

'Do you carry a revolver?'

‘No, never!’

‘In New York, when I went there for business, I always carried a gun.’

‘But this is Paris!’

The sausages *were* good. Popinga drained his glass and found it full again.

‘Are you staying in a good hotel?’

‘Yes, very good.’

‘I’m at the Grand,’ the stranger said. ‘It’s excellent.’

And he proffered a box of cigars, from which Kees took one without embarrassment, because just once, after all this time, and especially in this environment, he could allow himself the luxury of smoking a cigar.

‘You don’t know where they sell American newspapers, do you? I’d like to check the Stock Exchange reports.’

‘In all the kiosks. There’s one about fifty metres from here, along the street.’

‘Do you mind if I nip out for a moment? I’ll be right back. Order us a couple more sausages!’

There were fewer customers now as it was one o’clock and most of the other drinkers had left to have lunch elsewhere. Popinga waited five minutes, was surprised not to see his companion return, then thought about something else, and when he next looked at the clock, it was a quarter past one.

He had not noticed that the bartender was watching him closely, nor that he turned round to whisper something to his Chinese colleague.

The whisky had done him good. He felt in better shape. He would still be fit enough to deal with whatever Lucas or Louis and their like could throw at him, and he promised himself that this very afternoon, he would devise a plan that would amaze them and would oblige the journalists to refer to him in very different tones.

Why hadn’t the American come back? He surely couldn’t have got lost! Popinga opened the door, and looked out on to the pavement, saw the newspaper kiosk at the corner of the street, but of his companion there was no trace.

Then he laughed bitterly at the idea that he had just been swindled, and that the other man had left him to pay the bill.

Just another little misfortune! He was getting used to them.

‘Barman, another whisky, please.’

He could get drunk. He was sure that whatever happened, he'd keep a cool head, and would not do anything to give himself away.

To pass the time, he went over to a machine that distributed chewing-gum, then he asked for another cigar, because he had dropped his on the floor, then he looked round, and became aware that the bar was now completely empty and that the Chinese waiter was eating his lunch, alone at the back of the room, while the other bartender was sorting out the glasses.

How cunning of the other man to have tricked him into paying for four sausages and several whiskies! He wasn't rich, certainly. He needed his money more than anyone, because for him it was, so to speak, a matter of life and death. One detail summed up the whole story: when a shirt was dirty, he couldn't have it laundered, so he had to buy another and throw into the Seine a shirt that had only been worn for a few days, and was practically new.

Why not order another sausage, and then that would do for his lunch? And it occurred to him that he might go and spend the afternoon at the races, which would do him good, since it was exhausting walking round the same places all the time.

He was about to open his mouth when the barman too, as if by chance, began to speak. Poppinga let him begin first.

'Excuse me for asking, but do you know the gentleman you came in with?'

What should he reply? Yes or no?

'Well, slightly.'

The barman looked awkward and went on:

'You know what he does?'

'He's in the leather trade.'

The Chinese waiter from the back of the room was listening and Poppinga realized that something was in the air, and for a moment was tempted to run out of the door and disappear at top speed.

'Well, he's fooled you, then!'

'What do you mean?'

'I didn't dare warn you, because there were other people about, and also because I didn't know whether you were a friend of his.'

And the barman, as he picked up a bottle of gin, sighed:

'So it's the same old story, I should have known.'

'I don't understand.'

‘I know. You soon will. Do you have a lot of money on you?’

‘Quite a bit.’

‘Well, check your wallet. I don’t know which pocket you usually keep it in, but I’m prepared to bet anything you like it isn’t there now.’

Popinga patted his pockets and felt his throat constrict. As the barman had predicted, his wallet was no longer there.

‘You didn’t notice that while he was chatting and joking, he kept digging you in the ribs? That’s his speciality. I’ve known him for ten years. The police know him too. One of the most skilful pickpockets in Europe.’

For a second, Kees closed his eyes. For that same second, his hand went to the pocket of his overcoat.

As if the theft of all his money, his only resource in his struggle, were not enough, the American had also taken his razor, deceived no doubt by the shape of its wrapping, and thinking it contained something valuable.

Thousands of people might have been victims of a pickpocket that day in Paris. For most of them, if not all, it would simply mean that they lost a sum of money, great or small.

But there was one person, and only one, whose twelve hundred francs and his razor were, so to speak, his lifeline! Kees Popinga! And this man, more than anyone else, was on the defensive. Since that morning, fate had shown him, in the shape of a newspaper article, a threatening face.

And he had thought he could take a break, a kind of respite. He had accepted the whisky and sausages, and the conversation, which was such a change from his perpetual soliloquy.

‘I was on the point of warning you. But you weren’t looking at me. And then, as I said, I thought perhaps you were a friend of his, even a partner in crime.’

Popinga addressed a weak smile at the barman, who was apologizing.

‘Did you lose a lot of money?’

‘No, not much,’ Kees, replied, maintaining his near-angelic smile. No, he hadn’t lost a lot of money, or a little. He had lost it all! Everything a man can lose, stupidly, by chance, yes, it was the fault of chance, which had decided to cheat him, the same way both Louis and the police were cheating him.

He couldn’t make up his mind to leave. He looked at the floor, because he had felt a prickling under his eyelids and he was afraid of letting tears fall.

It was too much! Too stupid! And too gratuitous!

‘Do you live far from here?’

He gave a smile. A real one. He still had the strength to do that.

‘Yes, quite a long way.’

‘Listen. I trust you, I’ll lend you twenty francs for a taxi. I don’t know whether you’ll be reporting this to the police. It would really be a good thing for everyone if they could arrest him.’

Kees nodded. He wanted to sit down and think, put his head in his hands and burst out laughing or crying. It wasn’t just stupid. It was revolting, and he was convinced that he had not deserved this.

What had he done? Yes, what had he done? Apart from . . .

Apart from one small thing, obviously, but he had considered it justified. Only he hadn’t thought it through. It had been because of his hatred for Rose . . . An instinctive hatred, that had no precise grudge to explain it . . . And he had written to Chief Inspector Lucas to denounce the gang.

But did that deserve, as a consequence . . .?

He took the twenty francs the barman gave him. He looked up and saw his own face in the mirror, through the chalked-up lists of drinks on the glass, a face that expressed nothing, neither sorrow nor despair, nothing at all, a face that looked like one he had seen ten years before in Groningen, the face of a man who had been knocked down by a tram, and both of whose legs had been cut off. The injured man did not yet know that. He had not had time to register the pain. And while other people were fainting on the street all round him, he had been looking at them with an incommensurable astonishment, wondering what was wrong with them and what had happened to him, why he was there on the ground in the middle of a screaming crowd.

‘I’m sorry,’ he stammered. ‘Thank you.’

He opened the door. Then he had to walk, but he was unconscious of the direction he had taken, the people he was jostling against, or the fact that he was talking to himself.

They had cheated. That was the only self-evident truth. They were all cheating, in their fight with him. They were cheating because he was too clever, and could not be beaten by playing straight.

That famous Chief Inspector Lucas, who did not dare publish his own photograph, was the number-one cheat, and was not above making bad

poker moves, letting people think he was in Lyon and knew nothing about any car thieves.

Louis had cheated, because he was doing deals with the police. And Jeanne Rozier, she was a cheat too.

Popinga would not have believed it of her. If the attitude of the others filled him with indignation and disgust, her treachery hurt, because he had always thought there was something between them.

And the proof of *that* was that he had not killed her!

And now chance had cheated him too, by sending him this vulgar American, who did nothing but pick the pockets of his drinking companions.

And who would have no use for a razor that had cost sixteen francs.

It was too stupid.

And simply nauseating.



11.

How Kees Poppinga learned that a tramp's suit of clothes can cost as much as seventy francs, and how he preferred to strip naked

It was possibly even more exhausting to think than to walk. Especially since Poppinga had decided to do so seriously, to get to the bottom of things, to think it all through from A to Z, and review everything that could possibly concern himself, Kees Poppinga.

Hadn't the despicable Chief Inspector Lucas and the insignificant Louis decided that he should no longer have the right to think in peace, and had not an amiable pickpocket robbed him of even the possibility of sitting down somewhere?

Because to sit down in Paris requires money! Kees had been reduced, at about five o'clock, to go and think inside a church, where rows of candles were burning in front of an unfamiliar saint. Afterwards, he had no recollection of what he had done. Not that it mattered in the least. What mattered was that he should *think*, that he suddenly stopped dead in the course of his thinking because a passer-by was staring at him, and that Kees gave a start and felt the need to run away, but that he reasoned with himself, then had great difficulty retrieving the thread of his ideas.

Or sometimes, it was a trivial little idea that came and perched on top of the others and became unduly important, distracting him from his main train of thought.

The number of hours he had been walking was nobody else's business and he had no need for anyone to feel sorry for him, since he did not feel sorry for himself. But the fact was that he had no right to stop walking! With only twenty francs in his pocket, he could not go into a hotel. As for

the cafés that stay open most of the night, they were just the sort of place where he might get caught.

If he had been wearing shabby clothes, it might have helped. Then he would be able to sleep under a bridge: but a tramp wearing clothes of good quality like his own would have aroused suspicion.

So he walked. No one distrusts a man who is walking along with the air of going somewhere. Only he was not going anywhere, and from time to time, when he was sure of being alone in a street, he would stop on a doorstep.

And where had his thinking got him? Here came a new idea, to distract him, a thought or perhaps a sensation.

It felt like when Frida had been born.

Why? He would have found that hard to say. He was walking along the banks of the Seine, very far from the centre, perhaps already outside Paris. At the water's edge, there were huge factories, their many windows illuminated, while their chimneys lit up the sky with a blaze of flame.

It was raining, slanting rain. Perhaps that was it, since when his daughter had been born it had been raining too. It was in summer, but the rain was falling at just the same angle. And it must have been about the same time of day. No, because it was summer, and the sun rises earlier. Well, never mind. It had been before daybreak, and Poppinga had gone to pace about outside the house in the rain, bare-headed, hands in pockets, looking up at the windows on the first floor. In the working-class district across the bridge, other windows were lit up, and he had imagined people struggling out of bed and washing their faces.

But what did all that matter to him? He had to take an important decision and he was letting himself be distracted by these things, even stopping to look at the river, which seemed to be dividing itself in two, at the junction with a canal.

Another empty stretch of embankment. Then some tall buildings with lighted windows, and a café, its owner shivering as he started the coffee machine.

He shrugged his shoulders. Always the same. Of course he could go in, walk up to the counter, looking innocent, knock out the proprietor when he turned round, and run away with the money in the till.

But to do that there was no need to be Kees Poppinga!

No! It just wasn't worth thinking about that sort of thing. He had gone through his options, one by one, all afternoon, he had considered what he might do, and it was as if the slate had been wiped clean with a damp sponge.

It was too late. In fact, it had always been too late, because he had started off badly.

He was more intelligent than Landru, or all the other criminals whose crimes were spoken of with awe, but those other men had been prepared for what they were about to do, they had taken all the necessary steps, which he too would have been able to do, if he had wished to.

But it wasn't his fault. If only Pamela hadn't gone off into that hysterical laughter! Apart from that, he did not think he had made any mistakes, and people would have to recognize that one day.

Groups of men were walking past, heading for a large factory, and Poppinga was obliged to be careful not to attract attention, because now he had a duty not to be caught.

He had a task to accomplish. After that, things would move quickly. But for the moment, he must hold firm, and above all avoid giving himself away.

But it is hard for a man who has been walking for over ten hours in the rain not to attract attention.

It would be best to go on walking, to go through Ivry, then Alfortville.

It was still not light, and daybreak only started to appear when he found himself in what seemed to be the countryside, on the banks of the Seine where there were bollards for mooring boats.

The water was yellowish, the current rapid, and the river was ferrying along rubbish and branches of trees. A hundred metres further on was a low-built house with lights showing on the ground floor, and Poppinga could read a sign: The Laughing Carp. He did not at first understand what it meant, but when he did he shrugged. How odd to call a carp 'laughing', when it is a fish that actually has a very small mouth!

The building was surrounded with arbours, or rather metal stands which must in summer turn into arbours, and a dozen small rowing-boats were pulled up on the bank.

Poppinga walked on past at first, trying to be inconspicuous, just to take a look, and saw a sturdy woman stoking the stove in a roomy café, while a man, the owner no doubt, was eating at a table covered with brown oilcloth.

He made up his mind, put on an almost jovial expression, and said as he went in: 'Terrible weather, isn't it!'

The woman gave a start: he was sure she was frightened and had feared some kind of aggressor. And indeed she went on looking at him suspiciously when he came to sit near the stove.

'Is it possible to have a cup of coffee?'

'Course you can.'

A cat was curled up on a chair.

'And can I trouble you for some bread and butter?'

These people couldn't know who they were dealing with, and little suspected that the following day . . .

He ate the food, although he did not feel hungry. Then as the day dawned fully and the electric lights were switched off, he asked for some writing paper.

At last he was sitting in front of a sheet of poor-quality squared paper, such as you find in village groceries, and, after looking out of the window at the sullen river, he wrote:

Dear Sir,

As your newspaper reported yesterday, a certain Chief Inspector Lucas, who has been saying for two weeks now that my arrest is only a matter of hours, has released some common criminals and former prisoners in order to send them to track me down.

Would you be good enough to publish this letter, which will put an end to a pointless manhunt, and to a situation without glory or honour.

This is the last time I shall be writing to you, and the last that anyone will hear from me.

I have now found a way to achieve the goal I set myself on leaving Groningen and breaking with everyday rules.

By the time you receive this letter, I will no longer be called Kees Poppinga, and I shall no longer be in the situation of a criminal fleeing the police.

I shall have an honourable name, an unchallengeable identity, and I shall be in the category of men who can do what they please because they possess money and cynicism.

You will forgive me for not vouchsafing whether it will be in London, America or even simply in Paris that my future activities will be carried on, but you must understand that discretion is absolutely essential.

All you need to know is that I shall be in high finance, and instead of going to see the likes of Pamela or Jeanne Rozier, I shall choose my official mistresses from the stars of stage and screen.

That, my dear sir, is what I wished to convey to you, and if I have given you this exclusive insight, it is because your collaborator Saladin, to whom for a while I took a dislike, was most helpful to me in yesterday's article.

Let me repeat – and I know what I am saying – that by the time you receive this letter, I shall be completely invulnerable, and Monsieur Lucas will have to close the investigation that he has been so brilliantly and elegantly conducting.

I shall have proved that simply by using his native wits, a man who was a mere employee as long as he observed the rules of convention, may aspire to any position when he seizes his freedom.

Please receive, my dear sir, the formal salutations of one who is signing for the last time
Kees Poppinga

He almost added ironically 'paranoiac'. Then, as the café owner was standing in the doorway watching the rain fall, and since Poppinga could see the little green-painted boats outside, he felt the need to say:

'You know, I've got a boat too.'

'Ah!' said the other man politely.

'But it's a very different model. I don't think you have them in France.'

He explained how his little craft was built, as the owner's wife fetched the buckets ready to sluice down the café floor.

The most extraordinary thing was that when he was talking about the *Zeedeufel*, he suddenly felt his eyes stinging and had to turn aside. He could see his boat, as spick and span as a toy, moored on the canal, and all at once

...

'How much do I owe you? By the way, what is the best way to get to Paris from here?'

'There's a tram stop five hundred metres away.'

'And to get to Juvisy?'

'You have to take a train from Alfortville. Or else go right into Paris and get the bus.'

He found it hard to leave. He looked at the table he had been using to write on, the stove, the cat sleeping cosily on a straw-seated chair, the old woman getting down on her knees to wash the floor, and the man who was smoking a curved pipe and wearing a blue seaman's jersey.

The Laughing Carp, he muttered to himself.

He would have liked to say something to them, letting them know that they had just witnessed, without realizing it, a very important event, and advising them to look carefully at the newspapers next day.

He lingered in the café. He would also have liked a glass of something alcoholic, but he needed to keep careful track of his twenty francs.

'I'll be on my way, then,' he sighed.

And the people there were indeed waiting for him to leave, since they found his behaviour odd.

His original idea had been rather different. He had planned to make his way to Juvisy on foot, along the Seine, in a leisurely way, since he had the

whole day ahead of him. But what proves that he had kept a cool head was that he had just thought, as he wrote his letter, that if it bore a postmark from a place near Juvisy, they would make a connection, and then his epistle would not have served its purpose.

It would be better to go back into Paris. He took the tram and its shuddering made him feel sick, as happens when you are very tired. Near the Louvre, he bought a postage stamp and put his letter into the post box, after holding it for a long moment over the slot.

Now he had no need to think any more. It was enough to carry out what he had decided, point by point, without making any mistakes.

It was still raining. Paris was grey, dirty, and as confusing as a nightmare, full of people who didn't know where they were going, full of streets, around the central market, Les Halles, where your foot slipped on discarded vegetables, and where the shop windows were full of shoes. It was the first time that he had noticed the extraordinary number of shoe-shops with hundreds of pairs in the displays.

He might perhaps have said in his letter that . . .

But no! For them to believe him, it was important not to overdo it. In any case, it was too late. Too late for everything! He hadn't even had the courage to take the man's clothes.

Because he needed clothes, whatever it cost. And during the night, near a Métro bridge, he had come across a drunk, fast asleep on a bench.

All it would have taken was to knock him out with a blow to the head, and undress him. What harm could it do? The man had vomited and an empty litre bottle lay alongside him.

Popinga was sure that it wasn't because he had felt sorry for the man. No, it wasn't that. He alone could understand: it was too late, and that was all.

Even if he had done things differently from the start, he knew now that it would never have worked. One of the newspapers had provided him with the key to the drama, and on first reading, Kees had not noticed, but had put the article in his pocket with the others, considering it one of the less interesting ones.

It is evident, the reporter had written, over the signature Charles Bélières, *that we are dealing with an amateur.*

And now he had got the message. He had understood it the moment the barman had told him that he had been robbed of his wallet. *He was an amateur!* That was why Chief Inspector Lucas was treating him with

disdain. That was why the journalists were not taking him seriously, and why Louis was alerting the ‘underworld’ against him.

An amateur! To become something else would have been within his power, but only on condition of setting about it earlier and above all differently.

Why was he bothering to think about this, since it was over? He shouldn’t do it. It disturbed his mind the same way his stomach was now feeling disturbed, and he mustn’t forget about the clothes. For this, he had to find a street he had discovered the week before, a narrow alleyway behind a local bank, where they sold second-hand clothes.

He was trudging through a strange neighbourhood of Paris, crossing Rue des Rosiers, which reminded him of Jeanne – and what would she say? – when the idea briefly occurred to him of selling his watch. But what was the point? What would anyone give him for a watch that had only cost eighty francs?

He should not be yearning for comforts, or rolling his eyes outside cafés like a child who is refused a sweet. Alcohol would change nothing! What mattered was his letter, and he repeated its sentences, deciding in the end that it wasn’t too bad an effort, although there were some details he had forgotten to add.

What headline would they give it? And how would they comment on it?

Above all, he must stop glancing at himself in the mirrors of the shopfronts. It was ridiculous. It could attract attention. And most of all, it made him feel sorry for himself.

Keep on walking. Now at last, he had reached Rue des Blancs-Manteaux, and here was the little shop on the right he had noticed the other week. The main thing was to look natural, and manage to smile.

‘Excuse me, madame . . .’

Since it was an old woman who appeared, among the shabby clothes deep inside the shop.

‘Can you help me? I thought it would be fun to dress up as a tramp for a fancy-dress ball. An amusing idea, don’t you think?’

Yet he could see, in a bamboo-framed mirror, an image of a Poppinga pale in the face, perhaps from weariness.

‘How much would it cost, an old suit like this one?’

It was even more worn out than the ones Mama saved, back in Groningen, to give to a poor old man who came by every Easter.

‘For you, sir, just fifty francs! What do you say? Good condition, look. The lining has been replaced.’

This was one of the great events of his life. He had never imagined that an old second-hand suit could cost so much, and he was being asked to pay another twenty francs for a pair of shapeless shoes.

‘Thank you, I’ll think about it. I’ll be back.’

She caught up with him in the street to shout:

‘Come back! You can have the whole lot for sixty francs, special price for you, sir! And I’ll throw in a cap as well!’

He fled, his shoulders hunched. He didn’t have sixty francs, not even fifty. Well, that was that. He’d do something else. He had another idea, one that brought a sarcastic smile to his lips, because this time, now that fate had taken a hand, events would go beyond what might be imagined.

He would see it through to the end. The end of his idea and his logic.

And too bad if . . .

He stopped himself just in time. He should not talk to himself in the street. In his situation, it would be stupid to be arrested now.

He walked further. He went into another church, but a wedding was taking place, so he preferred to go out again.

‘Can’t you look where you’re going, you fool!’

The fool was himself, almost knocked down by a car. He didn’t even turn round.

Would it really have been pointless to give himself up, to refuse the services of a lawyer, and to stand up calmly in front of the court, open a file and begin to speak in a smooth voice:

‘You all believed that . . .’

Too late. He really should not keep going back over the past all the time. By this evening, the newspaper would have received his letter and the first thing they would do would be to show it to Chief Inspector Lucas.

This weariness was strange, it felt like a hangover. At the same time, he was clear-headed – and yet not. He saw the passers-by as ghosts, and bumped into them, stammering apologies and moving off again quickly. But he forgot no detail of what he intended to do, and found his way without difficulty to Porte d’Italie, where he asked the times and prices of buses for Juvisy.

After buying his ticket, he had eight francs fifty left and he wondered whether to eat or drink, ended up doing both, eating two croissants with a

coffee, and drinking a glass of spirits, after which there was no question of going back, or eating or drinking anything else.

Nobody suspected anything. The waiter served him as if he were a normal human being, and someone even asked him for a light.

On the bus, at about five in the afternoon, he was seated alongside people who had no idea.

And yet a few days earlier, when he still had some money, he could have got into a bus carrying a bomb, and blown the vehicle and everyone in it to smithereens! Or he could have derailed a train, which is not difficult.

So if he was there now, it was because he wished to be there, because he had decided it was too late, and because he had found an even better solution.

Everyone would be furious! As for Jeanne Rozier . . . Who knows? He had always thought she was in love with him without knowing it. From now on, she would be even more so, and her Louis would seem a very pathetic individual.

He recognized the downhill slope and the first houses of Juvisy, got off the bus and found his legs trembled so much that he had to wait a moment before he dared to walk on.

One detail gave him pause. He could see the Goin & Boret garage and a light in the bedrooms on the first floor. Had the police let Goin go as well? It seemed unlikely. The papers would have mentioned it. Anyway, if Goin was around, there would have been a light in the garage.

No, it must be Rose that they had released, perhaps on bail. This thought almost spoiled all his plans, since Poppinga had to resist his desire to go in and frighten her, and perhaps . . .

Only then, nothing would exist any more, not the letter or anything else. In the same way, he had no right to go into the café where he had played the fruit machine, and where he could see through the steamed-up windows several of the railwaymen.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to eat. And yet it hadn't been much. But it still lay heavy on his stomach. He walked through the deserted streets, went round the station by the level crossing and looked from a distance at the light in the window which had been his, and through which he had escaped from the garage.

If he didn't get a move on, his courage might fail him. The time didn't matter, as long as it was dark. But he needed to find the Seine, and Poppinga

realized that he had been mistaken about the geography of this place, because he kept walking along the railway line but still without seeing any sign of the river.

He pressed on through waste patches, allotments, disused sandpits, and once almost fell into a water-filled ditch. Perhaps it was because he was so tired that the journey seemed so long? No, that wasn't it, because he could see clusters of lights which signified villages or housing estates, so he could guess the distance he had travelled.

Trains went past. He would jump and look at the other side of the tracks and whisper:

'It's nothing really . . .'

Then he wiped his face, pretending it was because of the rain, but he knew that the drops reaching the corner of his mouth were salty.

A trap, pulled by a trotting horse, came towards him. From a distance, all you could see was its lantern; closer up, he could see a couple under a heavy rug, a man and woman huddled together, and imagined he could feel the warmth of the two bodies, hip to hip.

'It's nothing really . . .'

All the same, if he had had sixty francs, he would have had a suit. At last, he found the Seine, not far from a railway bridge, and he had the feeling he must have walked several kilometres.

His watch had stopped again. It was a useless watch, but that didn't matter any more.

And to think he still didn't really know the meaning of the word 'paranoiac'.

It was cold now. Yet another stroke of fate! And he was obliged to get rid of his shoes, since they carried the name of a maker in Groningen, and the same went for his socks, which his wife would have recognized. He took them off on a bank where some thorny shrubs were growing. Then he took off his jacket, his waistcoat and his trousers, and shivered.

The only thing he could have kept on, because he had bought it in Paris, was the shirt, but he thought that was ridiculous, so he removed it.

After that, he put his overcoat back on and stayed motionless for a long moment, looking at the water flowing past a few metres away.

It was really cold. Especially since his bare feet were in a puddle. Better to move fast because it had to be done, like it or not, and with clumsy movements he went closer to the river and threw all the clothes in.

Then he went back up the bank, lips trembling, and when he reached the railway track, not far from a green light, whose meaning he did not understand, something extraordinary happened.

Whereas, up until then, he had been driven by a kind of inner fever, he now suddenly became perfectly calm, calm in a way he had never experienced before.

At the same time, he looked all around and wondered what he was doing there, naked under his overcoat, balancing on the sleepers so as not to hurt his feet on the ballast.

His hair was dripping wet, his face was wet, he was shivering and he stared wildly at the river carrying away his clothes, good-quality clothes that belonged to him, Kees Poppinga.

To a man who also owned a house in Groningen, a stove of the very best make, cigars on the mantelpiece and an excellent wireless set, worth almost four thousand francs!

If it had not been so far away he would perhaps have tried to go home, quietly, climbing in through the kitchen window, and the next morning he would have whispered:

‘It was nothing, was it?’

What had he done in the end? He had wanted to . . .

No, stop thinking! He must not, whatever he did, think about things like that, because the letter had been sent.

That was that. It was over! He had already let a train go past on one set of tracks and he mustn’t miss the next, not to mention that a railwayman might spot him, since he had noticed that company employees walked along the tracks with lanterns.

Still, it was very stupid. But he couldn’t help that. It was stupid, but he lay down across the right-hand track, resting his cheek on the rail.

The metal rail was freezing cold, and Poppinga began to weep quietly, peering into the darkness, to the very end of the darkness, where he would soon see a pinpoint of light approaching.

Afterwards, there would be no more Poppinga. Nobody would ever know, because he wouldn’t have a head! And everyone would think, because of what he had written, that . . .

His reflexes almost made him sit up, because he could hear the locomotive and he was so cold; he sensed a train about to appear round the bend.

He had told himself he would close his eyes. But as the train approached, he kept them open, curling up, and staring, wide-eyed and breathless, although his mouth was open.

The light and the thunderous sound approached, and suddenly the sound got much louder, to the degree that he thought he must be dead.

Yet next thing, he heard voices, then it went quiet, and only at that point did he realize that a train had stopped on the *other* track, that two men were jumping down from the engine, and windows were being lowered.

He stood up. He had no idea how. Neither did he know how he managed to run, but he clearly heard one of the engine drivers shouting:

‘Look out, he’s running away!’

It was not true. He could not walk another step. He had thrown himself down behind a bush, but people were all round him and someone suddenly pounced on him, as if he were a wild animal they were frightened of, and grabbed both his wrists.

‘Watch it, train on the down line!’

For him it was all over. He was not aware of the express train finally thundering along the track he had chosen, nor that he was being taken away in a second-class compartment, with a man, a woman, and the train’s guard.

It was their problem now. Nothing to do with him any more.



12.

Which shows that it is not at all the same thing to drop a black chess piece into a cup of tea as into a glass of beer

Yes, it was their problem now! Kees himself did not flinch and, wrapped in his overcoat, he walked the length of the platform at Gare de l'Est, between two lines of curious onlookers, jostling each other and joking.

He was very dignified, indifferent to this vulgar curiosity, and in the stationmaster's office, he remained completely calm, not deigning to answer any of the questions put to him, and merely stared at his interlocutors as if they were rather unexpected objects.

Since it was glaringly obvious, once and for all, that they would never understand.

He had to sleep on a sort of hard, narrow couch. Then they woke him up and made him put on an inspector's uniform, too tight for him, so he could not button the jacket, which was a matter of supreme indifference to him.

It was almost broad daylight when they brought him a pair of carpet slippers with leather soles, since they could find no shoes in his size.

And it was still the other people who were looking impressed. They watched him with a kind of fearful respect, as if he had acquired the power of casting a spell on them.

'And you still don't want to tell us who you are?'

No! What was the point? He simply shrugged his shoulders.

They put him into a taxi, and he recognized the Palais de Justice, as they turned into one of its courtyards. Then he was in a cell, quite well lit, with a bed. Later on, when he had slept again, a fussy little man with a grey goatee beard poked him all over, asking him questions.

Popinga did not reply. Although he didn't know yet. It was only after someone called out in the corridor:

‘Professor Abram! You’re wanted on the phone!’

And this was the inventor of the *paranoiac* label, who now answered the call and went out, carefully shutting the door.

What did it matter to Popinga if he found himself in the special infirmary attached to the police cells, or anywhere else? All he wanted was a bit of peace and quiet, since he felt he would be capable of sleeping two, three or even four days running, sleeping anywhere, on a bench, on the ground.

Since it was all over . . .

He now had no watch or anything else. They had brought him some hot milk to drink. Waiting for the professor to return, he lay down, and it may have been some time, since he went off to sleep again, then when they woke him, it wasn't Abram but someone else, a plainclothes officer, who put handcuffs on him and dragged him through a labyrinth of corridors and staircases, to an office that smelled of pipe tobacco.

‘You can leave us.’

Through the window, you could see the Seine, with its yellowish water. An ordinary-looking man, rather stocky and slightly bald, was seated, and indicated to Popinga that he should sit down too.

Docilely, Popinga obeyed, and allowed himself to be looked at and poked without showing the least sign of impatience.

‘Yes,’ his interlocutor muttered gruffly, after looking at him first from a distance, then from closer up, and finally right in the eye.

Then suddenly, he asked:

‘So what did you think you were up to, Monsieur Popinga?’

He did not move a muscle. It mattered little to him to know whether this was the famous Chief Inspector Lucas. Or that the door opened and a woman wearing a squirrel fur coat came in, stopped short, and then said in a breathless voice:

‘Oh, yes, it’s him all right . . . But how he’s changed!’

So what? Who would appear next?

The other two shamelessly enacted their short exchange in front of him. Lucas wrote out a statement, which Jeanne Rozier signed, shooting anxious glances at Popinga.

Whatever next? Would Louis, Goin and the others, Rose even, parade in one after another?

If only they would let him sleep! What difference would it make to them, since they could come and look at him or even poke him with their fingers, any time they wanted to?

He was left alone, then more people came in, then he was left alone again, and finally he was taken back to his cell, where at last he could lie down.

As if he was going to be stupid enough now to tell them that he was not insane!

Now that the cards had fallen the way they had.

Could they perhaps have avoided making him march twice or three times a day through the corridors and stairs of the Palais de Justice, to Chief Inspector Lucas's office, where there would be different people every time, standing in the shadows, and being asked:

'Do you recognize him?'

'No, that's not him, he was smaller.'

He was also confronted with his letters.

'Do you recognize that this is your handwriting?'

He preferred to mutter:

'I don't know.'

And they could have bought him a suit that fitted and some socks, since he still had no socks! And those people in that strange room right up under the roof, who took his fingerprints and photographs of him, need not have left him without a stitch on in some sort of antechamber.

But apart from that . . .

Popinga was getting so accustomed to the routine that he showed no reaction even on the day of the lecture. And yet he had not been expecting it. He hadn't been warned. He had been taken into a small room, where two or three men, obviously insane, were waiting. Now and then, someone came to fetch one of them, about every quarter of an hour, and then that man did not reappear. You had to wait your turn!

Popinga was the last one left. Finally, they came for him, and he found himself on a platform in front of a blackboard, where tiny Professor Abram was holding forth. Below the platform, in a room which was dimly lit, about thirty people were sitting taking notes, some of them students, others too old to be students.

'Come forward, my friend. Don't be afraid. I simply want you to answer the few questions I am going to ask you.'

Kees had firmly made up his mind not to reply. He was not listening. He heard Professor Abram talking about him, using much more complicated terms than paranoiac, while the other people scribbled furiously. A few of them came forward to take a closer look at him and one of them, holding some kind of apparatus, took the measurements of his skull.

So what? They were the idiots here . . .

They also on one occasion took him to the visiting room, and suddenly brought him face to face with Mama, who had thought it necessary to dress all in black, as if she were a widow.

‘Kees!’ she exclaimed, clasping her hands together, ‘Kees! Don’t you know me?’

Because he stared at her calmly, no doubt, she gave a cry and fainted.

What else would they come up with? Would there be stories in the newspapers? Not that it mattered, since Popinga didn’t read them.

Other people, who must have been mental health experts, came to see him and he eventually learned to recognize them, because they always asked the same questions.

He had found a way of dealing with them. He would look them straight in the eye, seeming to wonder what they were so worked up about, and they did not insist for very long.

Sleep! And then eat something, then sleep some more, dreaming about things that were rather vague but often pleasant.

One day, they brought him a new suit of clothes, and Mama must have been consulted, since it almost fitted him. Next day, he was put into a police wagon which drove him to a railway station. Finally, accompanied by two men in plain clothes, he got into a train.

The two men with him appeared to be on edge, whereas Kees by contrast found the change of scene entertaining. They had closed the curtains, but through the cracks he could see people going up and down in the corridor, evidently hoping to catch a glimpse of him.

‘Think we’ll get back tonight?’

‘Don’t know, depends who comes to take delivery.’

His two companions ended up playing cards and offered him cigarettes, which they placed in his mouth casually, as if he were incapable of doing so himself.

Everyone except him must have known through the newspapers what was happening, but he was quite indifferent.

He even gave a smile when they went through first the Belgian, then the Dutch customs, because it took only a quick word from the two men to the customs officials for them not to visit their compartment.

After the customs post on the border with Holland, a Dutch police officer did join them, in fact, but since he did not speak French, he was content to read newspapers in a corner.

Then there was a lot of coming and going, with even a crowd of photographers on the station platform and in the corridors of the Amsterdam Law Courts. Poppinga remained quite calm, merely smiling or sometimes answering questions simply with:

‘I don’t know.’

There was a Dutch version of Abram, much younger than the man in Paris, who took a blood sample from him, X-rayed him, and examined him for over an hour, talking to himself, so that Poppinga had to work hard not to laugh.

After all that, it seemed to be over. The people outside knew this, though he did not. They must have decided that he was definitely insane, because they did not give him a lawyer, and nobody mentioned standing trial.

On the contrary. He was settled into a large brick-built house on the outskirts of Amsterdam. Through the barred windows, he could see a football pitch where a game was played every Thursday and Sunday.

The food was good. They let him sleep as much as he wanted to. Then they made him do exercises and he did them as best he could.

He was alone in a little room with white walls and hardly any furniture, and the most annoying thing was that he had to eat everything with a spoon since he was not allowed either knife or fork.

But what did that matter? Indeed, it was quite amusing. They all believed he was a madman.

What was more sinister, on the other hand, was that at night you could hear screams coming from the nearby rooms, followed by confused sounds. He never cried out at all. Not so stupid.

The doctor was about his own age, and he also wore grey suits and had gold-rimmed spectacles. He came along once a day, beaming and jovial.

‘So, my friend, have you had a good night? Still down in the dumps? You’ll see, you’ll get used to it. Your physical health is perfect and you’ll soon recover from this. Let me take your pulse.’

And Poppinga would stretch his wrist out obediently.

‘Excellent, excellent. Still a bit of resistance there, I see, but it’ll pass. I’ve had many cases like yours through my hands.’

Finally, in the visiting room, he was taken to see Mrs Poppinga, in the company of a male nurse. In Paris, she had been unable to say anything because she had burst into tears and fainted. But here she seemed to have summoned up all her strength.

She was wearing a dress that she used to put on when she went out to a mother-and-baby charity she supported, a simple dark dress, with a high neck.

‘Can you hear me Kees? Can I talk to you?’

He nodded, out of pity for her rather than anything else.

‘I’m only allowed to see you the first Tuesday of the month. Tell me first, is there anything you need?’

He shook his head.

‘You’re very unhappy, aren’t you? But so are we. I don’t know whether you understand or if you can imagine everything that has happened. I came on ahead to Amsterdam. And I found work at the De Jonghe Biscuit Factory. I don’t earn much, but I’m well thought of.’

He managed not to smile, since he was thinking that the De Jonghe biscuit makers also distributed stickers to place in albums. Which was what his wife liked best.

‘I’ve taken Frida out of her school, and she didn’t even cry. Now she’s doing a course in shorthand typing and, as soon as she gets her diploma, De Jonghe’s will take her on. Kees, you’re not saying anything!’

‘I think that’s very good!’

Hearing his voice set her off crying, in short sobs, as she patted her pink nose with her handkerchief.

‘I don’t know what I ought to do about Carl. He wants to go to the naval college at Delfzijl. I might be able to get him a scholarship.’

And that was how they got into a routine. She came along on the first Tuesday of every month. She never referred to the past. She told him:

‘Carl has got his scholarship, thanks to your old friend De Greef. He has been very kind.’

Or else:

‘We’ve moved house, because the other one was too dear. We’re lodging now with a very nice lady; she’s an officer’s widow with a spare room.’

Perfect, wasn't it? He slept a great deal. He did his exercises and walked in the courtyard. The doctor, whose name he did not know, took an interest in him.

'Is there anything that would cheer you up?' he asked him one day.

And since it was still too soon, Popinga replied: an exercise book and a pencil.

Yes, it was too soon, as was proved when he wrote at the front of the book, in deliberately ceremonial writing:

The Truth about the Kees Popinga Case

He had plenty of ideas about this. He vowed to fill up this book and ask for others, so as to leave a complete and accurate study of his case.

He had had time to think about it. The first day, he just did some curlicues under the title to decorate it, as in old books from the Romantic period. Then he slipped the exercise book under his mattress and, the day after that, took a long look at it and put it back.

He could reckon the passage of time only by the first Tuesday of the month, since there was no calendar in his room.

'What do you think, Kees? Frida has been offered a job working for a journalist. I wonder whether . . .'

Of course. He also wondered whether . . . but why not?

'Let her accept it.'

'You think so?'

Wasn't it odd, that he was being asked for his view, here in the madhouse? They developed the habit of asking his opinion about everything, the most trivial details, such as those that, back in Groningen, had been the subject of endless family debate.

'I'm wondering whether we should rent an apartment with a kitchen. Of course, the rent would be higher, but then . . .'

Of course, of course. He would approve. He would contribute his opinion. And Mama was more Mama than ever, though instead of sticking pictures in her album she was sticking God knows what together at De Jonghe's.

'They let me have biscuits half-price.'

'Well, that's marvellous, isn't it.'

Given that there was nobody who could remotely understand him. This was surely the best way, wasn't it?

He was so well behaved that he was allowed to spend two or three hours with two other inmates, both obviously insane, but one of them only became deranged at nightfall, while the other was the most reasonable man in the world as long as he was not contradicted.

‘But be careful, Kees!’ the doctor had warned him: ‘The slightest bit of trouble and it’s back to solitary.’

Why would he contradict these poor people? He let them say what they liked. Then when they had finished, he might start:

‘Well, when I was in Paris . . .’

Then he would soon stop short.

‘But you won’t understand. It doesn’t matter. If only you could play chess, though.’

He made himself a chess set out of paper, from the pages of the exercise book, so as to play against himself. Not that he was bored, because he never got bored, but out of a kind of sentimentality about the past.

What could it matter now? He was not even angry when he thought about Chief Inspector Lucas. He could see him again, walking around him, questioning him, poking him, and he knew that he, Poppinga, had won the game. So what?

No, he was not going to argue with his fellow-inmates, or with Mama, who had not changed, nor with anyone. And he even managed not to keep track of time passing; so that he smiled when one day Mama announced:

‘This is awkward. I don’t know what I should do. De Jonghe’s nephew has fallen for Frida, and . . .’

From her emotion, he recognized that she came from the outside world, that she didn’t have the experience of a Kees Poppinga. She was turning it into an affair of state! You would have thought the fate of the world depended on it.

‘What’s he like?’

‘Not bad. Very well brought up. He may not be very strong. He spent some of his childhood in Switzerland.’

It was really funny! That was the only word for it.

‘And Frida’s in love with him?’

‘She told me that if she can’t marry him, she’ll never marry anyone.’

‘Well then, tell them to get married.’

‘Only the thing is, the young man’s parents . . .’

Were of course hesitating to let their son marry the daughter of a madman!

Well, let them sort it out! He could do no more. He even took it a little too far, to the point that one day the doctor, seeing him poring over a game of chess, stayed more than a quarter of an hour behind him, watching the outcome, then murmured: 'Would you like it if we had a game now and then, at teatime? I see that you are very good!'

'Well, it's so easy, isn't it?'

But all the same, when he found himself facing the doctor, and playing with a proper chess set, the black pieces made of ebony and the white of pale wood, he could not resist the urge to play another practical joke.

This time, they were not in the Groningen chess club, or on Boulevard Saint-Michel in Paris. On the table, there were just two cups of tea and yet, seeing a bishop threatening him, Poppinga could not help purloining it, under cover of handling another piece, and dropping it in his tea, as he had once done with the beer glass.

The doctor was taken aback for a moment, then he saw the chessman in the cup, wiped his forehead and murmured as he stood up:

'Excuse me: I had forgotten I had another appointment.'

Fancy that! What if Poppinga had done it on purpose? If it amused him to remember certain things?

'You must excuse me too,' he said. 'It's an old story. I can't explain, and you certainly wouldn't understand.'

Too bad. It was safer this way. As was proved when the doctor thought of asking him for the exercise book he had given him to write his memoirs in, and where all that could be read for now was:

The Truth about the Kees Poppinga Case.

The doctor looked up, astonished, and seemed to be wondering why his patient had not written any more. And Poppinga, with his forced smile, felt obliged to say:

'There's no such thing as truth, is there?'



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